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OX HOUSE CAMEL RIVERMOUTH

a preface

TEN YEARS AGO, another filmmaker and I exchanged prints. His allegation, that some quality or other of my own work was implicated in its genesis, made more than usually urgent the accustomed opacity of what I received, so I resorted to an habitual strategy of regression.

Taking the film from the projector, mounting it on rewinds, removed it from serial, spectatorial time and returned it to a randomly accessible space, a skeletal emulation of the conditions under which it had been made, wherein, I expected, the postulates of its montage were sure of retrieval by a method that begins in imitation of a feral hunter, in search of traces of its prey, lacing a terrain with its own invisible pathways, ... and culminates, it is imagined, in the exemplary historical certitudes of autopsy.

This sort of effort is likely to go on for some time.

In the end, a resident six year old required to know why I spent so many consecutive evenings at the bench with a film that was not my own. Because I don't understand it, I said, and he answered: you're not supposed to *understand* films, you're only supposed to *make* them.

It is as remedy for some such jejune superstition, I suspect, and as prophylaxis against the syndrome of manipulated, insentient valorization which it masks and sustains, that these speculations have been written during the intervening decade.

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In his own *Confessions,* Augustine recalls the pretext of a discovery.

After the evening meal and Office, when Ambrose, his abbot, the better to be available for consultation, used to leave open the door of his cell, the youngsters in his Order repeatedly saw the old man in an incomprehensible exercise: sitting, silent by lamplight, staring at a book lying open on his knees, now and again turning a page. Long years later, Augustine remembered the strange tableau, and finally understood, in a blaze of astonishment, just what it was that he had seen begun, complemented and completed by his own recognition.

During that prolonged moment, Ambrose, the originator of a new kind of *cantus* and its neumic notation, participated in the primary instance of an action, at once of separation and of closure, that we must regenerate, in a condition of defective understanding, exactly because the mechanism of its understanding is under construction.

The existence of what we have come to call writing, in which the representation of the unspeakable through a disposition of marks on a surface superannuates the registration of phonemes by an arrangement of degenerate images, is entirely conditional, pivoting on the same abyss that divided mnemonically assisted recitations of gospel, epistle, martyrology ... the whole mass of utterance internally differentiated only to the degree that its text may be hieratically guaranteed incorrupt ... from the body engendered in the mute cooperation, the mutual interference which maintains its own energetic pattern, between writing and reading. Together they make up language, or the system of words, which commends itself to our most intimate attention because it is, for the present, the only system we have: by now a large part of speech, even, consists in the revocalization of subsystems of graphic signs.

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Nevertheless, the system of words remains incomplete in three senses:

1. The act of reading finds itself in momentary functional disequilibrium with respect to the act of writing. However we may

hold, with Roland Barthes, that the reader is inevitably born out of the death of the author, that assertion still requires a particular *effort* of belief, and thus implies a residual assumption of causal primacy for writing, and of special privilege for its author, ... whose reading is, in practice, supremely compromised, because it may never approach its text for the first time.

2. The system of words cannot state the conditions of its own completion, since it remains unable to define the terms of a metalanguage to describe its own limits. Neither local nor global criteria yet obtain for deciding whether any given element in a discourse is to be taken as linguistic or metalinguistic. Thus our investigation of language remains, in its uttermost reaches, an expanding inventory of what Kurt Gödel called *formally undecideable propositions*.

3. As an Ernest Fenollosa or a Gershom Sholem will always come forward to remind us, writing itself must be understood to harbor as its progenitor the dark repletion of the image. And there is, for the time being, no such thing as a conscious system of images that has not been assimilated, traduced, by written language, from the madcap aponomasia of the Middle Egyptian hieroglyph for *lapis lazuli*, through the austere poignancy of the Chinese ideogram for Being, to the opening montage of our own ancestral alphabet, with its collusion of animal husbandry, shelter architecture, nomadic domestication and geographic survey: ox, house, camel, rivermouth.

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It is only with the intervention of photography, along with its evolutionary progeny, film and video, that a reproducible and verifiable stream of images begins, just as the historic stream of words begins, for us, not with the articulating voice but with print, the sociable image of language. Language and image are the substances of which we are made; so it is much more than a matter of interest – it is our most inescapable and natural desire – that we undertake to invent, and to specify (using language, and even subverting it, if we can) the system of images. Such a project needs forbearance: even the notion of a grammar of the image, which must,itself,finally wither away in favor of a syntax, recedes perpetually, merging imperceptibly into that zone where intelligence struggles to preserve a distinction between what may be brought into focus and what may not.

Eventually, we may come to visualize an intellectual space in which the systems of words and images will both, as Jonas Mekas once said of semiology, "seem like half of something," a universe in which image and word, each resolving the contradictions inherent in the other, will constitute the system of consciousness.

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Language itself, which has been, before all else, the arena and instrument of power, emplaces obstacles against the circumscription of its territory, but the sciences, at least, are long and pragmatically accustomed to annihilating them. In his autobiography, Werner Heisenberg gives us a fragment of conversation from one of those weekend Alpine hikes that so bemuse Americans (even Sigmund Freud did it, in our own Adirondacks) in which he was joined by Planck, Born, Schrödinger, Bohr and Einstein. In that pure high air the conversation was, of course, of problems of discourse in physics. One night in a mountain hut, it fell to Bohr and Heisenberg to clear away after supper, and the elder scientist remarked to the younger that "our language is like dishwashing: we have only dirty water and dirty dishrags, and yet we manage to get everything clean."

We may transpose Bohr's aphorism into an image of an image. According to the laws of geometric optics, it is theoretically possible to represent, as an indivisible point in the focal plane of a *camera obscura,* every single point in the populated space before it. In fact, the vicissitudes of material and manufacture conspire against this, and points appear as disks of small but finite diameter. These disks are called circles of confusion. Even the most exact photographic transcription resolves, at last, into an orderly collection of imprecisions, bearable or useful only to the extent that its degree of inexactitude is known ... and forgiven.

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Fictions excepted, this book collects all the pieces I care to keep, from the interval of their composition. That is not intended to mean that I think it complete.

Circumstances never properly allowed anatomisation of Paul Strand's largely tacit conversion to cryptostalinism and Crocean esthetics; or of Edward Weston's disastrously typical caricature of political tourism during his tenure in Mexico, and his unacknowledged debts to Margrethe Mather, Tina Modotti, and Sonya Noskowiak. Muybridge looks too much the sentimental scientist, to the neglect of his fictive strength. The predicament of film practice, always embattled, has altered, catastrophically, as late Capitalism continues in its inexorable trajectory toward paroxysm. The aspirations of video have metamorphosed entirely: the geometric cheapening of electronic technology – a consequence of the West's last grand circus, in space – has brought to pass a Return of the Machine, whose kingdom is forever. And the landscape of photography, all but untrodden a dozen years ago, is now crisscrossed by hedgerows, barbed wire, and Masters of Art.

In short, the passage of time has generated new options and responsibilities for speculative writing, most of which I have left unattended in the not wholly unrewarded expectation that others might take them up. Meanwhile, the temptation to revise has been easy enough to resist. Aside from scattered surreptitious corrections in matters of fact, the reader will find my mistakes unchanged.

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The custom of ending a preface with thanks is too honorable (and too convenient) to discard. First of all, then, my thanks to Annette Michelson, whose generosity and gracious persistence as my editor, first at *Artforum* and now at *October*, is matched only by the warmth and exhilarating precision of her own writing. As much thanks, too, to Marion Faller, who has, to state the case eupehmistically, foresuffered every sentence. Thanks to the anonymous author of a postcard pointing out that Arthur Schopenhauer and Walter Pater were not the same person.

As for the manuscript: by and large, I typed it myself.

Buffalo, January, 1983

TIME OUT OF MIND:
a foreword

CARLOS Argentino Daneri, poet, inveterate developer of pictures and the true hero of Borges' *The Aleph,* "condemns our modern mania for having books prefaced, 'a practice already held up to scorn by the Prince of Wits in his own graceful preface to the *Quixote.*'" He does, however, acknowledge the foreword's use as 'accolade,' and proposes that 'Borges' act as "spokesman for two of (his) book's undeniable virtues – formal perfection and scientific rigor – inasmuch as this wide garden of metaphors, of figures of speech, of elegances, is inhospitable to the least detail not strictly upholding of truth.'" Borges, he whose name stands free of inverted commas, nowhere to my knowledge provides – not even in the *Essay on Ancient Germanic Literature* – sanction for the delicacy of Dasent, translator of the *Prose* or *Minor Edda,* who felt "no hesitation in placing the foreword to the ... *Edda* at the end of the volume." So be it.

The co-ordinates and contours of Frampton's Plot have been traced against the exfoliating chaos of the decade's discourse on film and photography. Like printers in the darkroom, we have been watching the development, in sharpened and proliferative detail, of a structured field in depth. Photography. To pursue this dazzling obvious simile one turn further, we are surprised by that now coming into view. We had thought Time captured, arrested, but it is History, encoded within the developing economy of production that emerges as the shaping, compositional object of that presumed arrest. We ought, by now, to have anticipated this, and yet there is, in all the current literature, the sense of an epiphany, delayed and redoubled in its power. Now, we are told, is Photography truly located, and now it is that we must set to work, establishing an archaeology, uncovering a 'tradition,' in the euphoric constitution of an aesthetic, reclaiming an indeterminate corpus, through scholarship and speculation, from the limbo to which it has been consigned.

It was in 1848 that Lamartine declared, "It is photography's servility which accounts for my deep contempt for that chance invention which can never be an art, merely an optical plagiarism of Nature. Is the reflection of glass on paper art? No, it is a sun stroke caught through a maneuver. But wherein lies its human conception? In the crystal, perhaps. Surely not in Man... The photograph will never replace the painter; one is a Man, the other a Machine. The comparison ends there." The refrain is by now familiar. But it is also Lamartine who, in the 'twilight' of his life, brazenly proclaims that, "Photography is more than an art; it is a solar phenomenon in which the artists collaborates with the sun." Romanticism's *hubris* had found, and has retained, its true Accessory; it is only in the brief Futurist moment propaedeutic to revolution that Romanticism will call, one half-century later, for the reconciliation and realignment of Man and Machine in a common VICTORY OVER THE SUN.

The breach within the reversal was one of twenty years of development of the techniques of mechanical reproduction. Lamartine's revision of judgment ratifies the already suspected implications – scientific, industrial, aesthetic – of that acceleration; it does not, however, project the epistemological malaise generated from the first by the technique as such.

If we may claim a position of privilege, it is insofar as we are witness to "the return of the repressed." The structure of a market in formation, the nature of its exchange mechanisms, the manner in which standards are defined and imposed, the transmutation of an ontologically inscribed plenitude into artificial scarcity are now plain to see, though still largely unarticulated in the contemporary discourse of photography; scholarship and commerce are mutually implicated in this setting into place. Thus, issues of provenance and value, of perceptual and semiotic analysis, a rhetoric of textual criticism are now formulated with reference to photographic process. They derive, most evidently and in the main, from the older traditions of art-historical and art-critical scholarship, as the commerce of photographs is shaped from the practices and institutions governing the exhibition and diffusion of prints and sculptural casts. Theory and history of photography strain, however, to ignore this complicity, much as art-historical connoisseurship feigns the disdain of the commerce it sustains. The notions of value, of aura or authenticity currently revived and adapted for photography are, as we know, the guarantors of such commerce/discourse.

We need, we urgently need, a radical sociology of photography to force upon us, to disclose to view, the inescapably ideological and historical nature and implications of our present photographic revisionism. Bernard Edelman has, in the only rigorous study of this sort known to me, begun to trace the process whereby the photograph begins to acquire value as originating in the sudden appearance of those techniques of reproduction that provoked a disequilibrium in established categories of description.

The history of this process can be divided into two parts. In the first, the reproductive capacity is defined as imputable to the machine itself. This is the artisanal period of the mid-19th century, when the photographer is very much the worker; he is then both in the service of the machine and at one with his tools: the proletarian of 'creativity.' Photography is, at this point in history, variously described as a curiosity, a toy, as useful. It has not yet been subjectivized.

The inscription of subjectivity will involve a reversal of relation between means and end. The work of the machine becomes the work of the subject, and this work is a means of 'creation.' Photographic reproduction then receives the mark of the subjective or intellectual act of 'creativity,' and it is then, precisely, that it begins to be the object of legislative protection. The photographer moves from the level and role of artisan to that of proletarian, and in time, to that of the artist. For it is in the interest of industry and of the market to guarantee, first of all, the status of the photograph as commodity, and subsequent to this, that of the photographer as artist. These will in turn generate the re-creation of scarcity which re-enforces the value of the print, revived from the pre-industrial era.

Above all, it engages the discourse of photography in the constitution of an ontology whose center is the founding presence of the artist, author and authorizing figure, reinstating precisely at that moment when the discourse of historiography is under fire and revision, its most suspect set of presuppositions.

Thus, in an interesting discussion organised in 1973, as if in immediate response to the crisis inaugurated by this revision, dealers debate with an historian and a photographer the modalities and mechanisms of photography's emergence into the fine-art market. This exchange of views turns, between euphoria and anxiety, upon one question: value as a function of scarcity. What can the artist and his dealer expect to gain or lose from the recognition that this is a medium of industrial multiplication? How, without absurdity, can it be restored to the privilege of a pre-industrial form? And the difficulties and contradictions in the problem are rehearsed in the obsessive insistence upon the privileged status of the dark room as the locus, within the productive chain, of "the creative process," as the ultimate origin of subjectivity and value within photographic production. Until the moment of high comedy in which the Photographer (Aaron Siskind) acknowledges his inability to distinguish the print made from his negatives by another from those of his own developing. In that moment, the artist/producer is dispossessed, evicted from his lair, his last refuge, as guarantor of craft, authenticity, autonomy and value.

The claims, then, of pioneers of the modern era such as Strand and Weston, assessed by Frampton, are informed with the cathectic exorbitance involved in sustaining, containing "the contradiction between the primacy of photographic illusion and the autonomy of the photographic artifact," and Frampton's diagnostic reading of their implication within this crisis supplies, for the first time and with a salutary impiety, another set of terms for their understanding. Weston, alternately protective and aggressive in his magisterial appropriation or mapping of the world is understood as the Forebear against whose erotic imperium, against whose apodictic terms, against whose voice – laconic and stentorian – over and against whose Name, one must locate one's own pretexts and construct one's practice.

It is then, within the extended moment of crisis articulated in those claims, that Frampton intervenes, relocating, displacing the terrain and terms of argument, elaborating over twenty years of artistic practice, a meditation upon Film and Photography. In image, text, film-text, textual film, the body of the world is explored, known in its temporality. The metaphors and elegances of these developing gardens re-inscribe the paths traced by those obsessive aporias instituted by the discourse of the Stoics and the paradoxes of Zeno, which have, time and again, provoked dissent, refutation, revision in the West's discourse upon Time and the formation of its Analytics. Alone then, among film-makers, Frampton can see "persistence of vision" as more than the perceptual construction of continuity between discrete frames, and rather as an hypostatization of the argument against the flow of Time as such. Consider, for example, Fox-Talbot's *Incisions* in history. They are first made, we are told, in 1832, the *annus mirabilis* which produces Galois' founding of set theory, Büchner's *Woyzeck*, and the first photographic images of Nièpce, as well. There is, however, a contextual term missing, for the immediately preceding year is that of the birth of Dedekind, to whose axiomatic intervention the image of the *Incisions* specifically refers.

It has been pointed out that Dedekind's axiom constitutes a particularly adroit presentation of our representation of Time. "If all points of a straight line fall into two classes, such that every point of the first class lies to the left of any point of the second class, then there exists one and only one point which produces this division of all points into two classes, this severing of the straight line into two two portions." So it is that we intuitively establish, within Time, a past and a future which are mutually exclusive. Together they compose Time stretching into eternity. Within this representation, 'now' constitutes the division which separates past and future; any instant of the past was once 'now,' and any instant of the future will be 'now.' Therefore, any instant may constitute this division. Although we know and retain discrete instants, we nevertheless complete them, establishing that continuum in which Time, for us, flows.

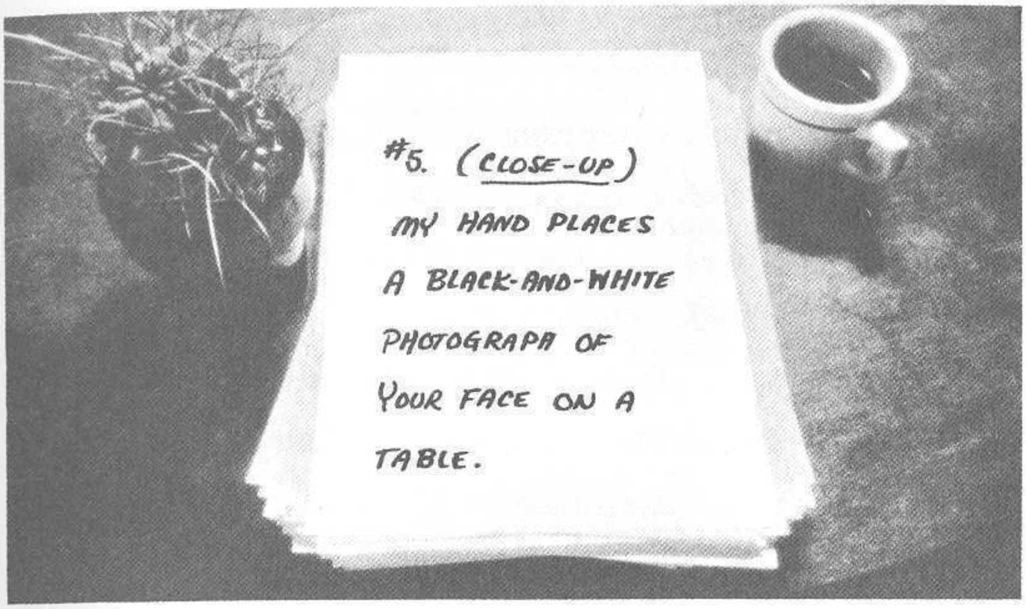
Dedekind argues that the discontinuousness of space, were it to be established, would not prevent us from filling in its gaps in thought, making it thus continuous. And this claim finds its response in the observation that such, indeed, is already the case, that gaps in Space are inexistent for us in so far as we cannot think the gap in Time.

Now, Frampton: "Talbot thought he was somehow augmenting History, by implanting into brief incisions, new values as stable, as endlessly recurrent and irrational as the decimal pi." The discovery of which, one might add, the Greeks are said to have celebrated by the hecatomb, that slaughter of 100 oxen which represented their most resplendent order of tribute, and for which the extravagance of late Georgian England seems to have devised no reasonable facsimile. Frampton's absorption in set theory (it has helped to shape the formal structure of his practice) works, as it were, *to contain the photogenic epistemological malaise within the terms of logic.* And yet, and yet...

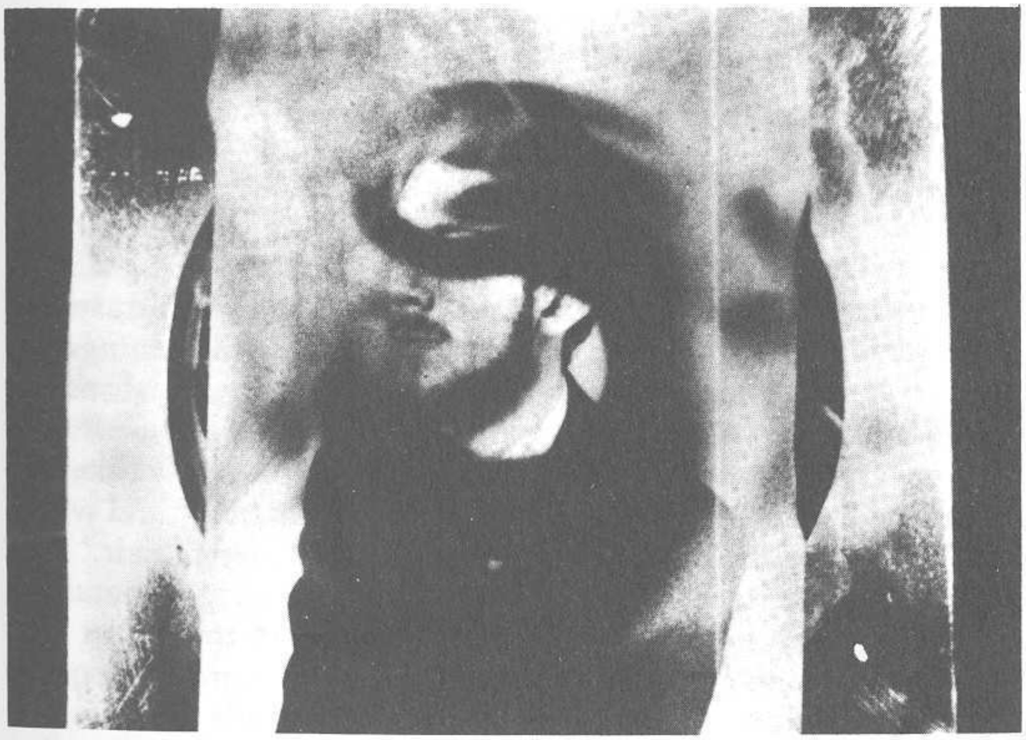
There exist several texts, absent from this volume, which point elsewhere, further, to an obstinately persistent, darker, more disquieting sense of things, one more difficult to contain within that conjunction of poetry and science of which Frampton is the lonely, percipient negotiator. I turn now to two of these, offering first some particulars of description.

Text I, entitled *Poetic Justice,* is presented in two forms: as film (black and white, silent, 16mm., running time: 30 minutes) and as book, published in 1972 by the Press of the Visual Studies Workshop. Description is contained in the particular that this work *is* one of description, that it answers to the description of script, complete with shot-sizes: a film-text in the most complete and condensed sense of the phrase. Projected through the written summary of each shot/page is the narrative of a triangle, its three points/agents designated by pronominal shifters, and consequently empty of identity and gender. 'I,' 'You,' 'Your Lover,' then, move in an invariant present (that of the speech act transcribed by the film-text-script) through a series of postures, gestures, attitudes, described in relation to a limited number of objects within a space (exterior/interior), whose integrity the reader/spectator will never apprehend or reconstruct. Central within that constellation of objects are a camera, still photographs (of protagonists), and central to the dynamics of this work is the passage from shots of cinematic action to those of still photography, effected within the grammar of the narrative, with the protagonists sometimes viewed as photographers and/or cinematographers.

It is at the center of this narrative, at what we might term its climax, beginning at shot number 122, that "in the Bedroom; You and Your Lover embrace, naked on the bed. Outside the window are spruces and junipers under snow." And from numbers 132 through 180, "outside the window," as "You and Your Lover" continue to "embrace, naked upon the bed," there transpires a catalogue of the


#5. (CLOSE-UP)
MY HAND PLACES
A BLACK-AND-WHITE
PHOTOGRAPH OF
YOUR FACE ON A
TABLE.

Hollis Frampton, Still from *Poetic Justice*.
Visual Studies Workshop Press



Hollis Frampton, Still from *Nostalgia*.
Collection, Anthology Film Archive

world's infinity in fifty-seven varieties of its events: outside that window "are," for example, and in the following order:

> peacocks strutting on a turf green
>
> hyenas disputing a carcass
>
> strands and bladders of kelp
>
> wrestler in a tag match
>
> an automatic turret lathe in operation
>
> a calm inland sea
>
> a squadron of pipers
>
> rings of Saturn, looming
>
> little girls skipping rope
>
> tumbled stacks of cordwood
>
> a display of ophthalmoscopes
>
> a party of mountaineers
>
> a park of bay trees
>
> a sky full of wheeling pigeons
>
> truck wheels plashing in muddy water
>
> three red-haired women rolling dice...

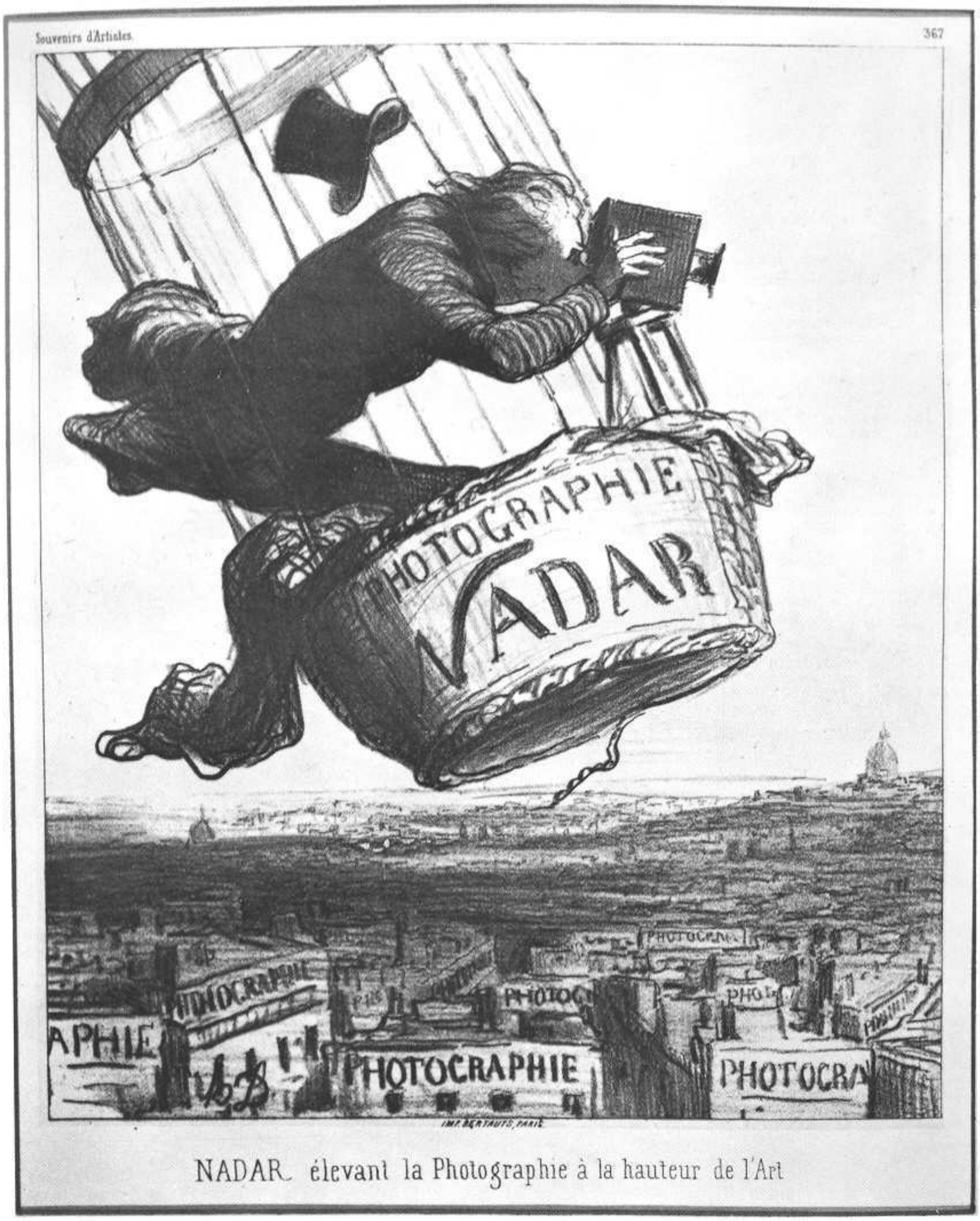
Any interruption of such a catalogue is necessarily arbitrary, but the limits of this fragment do, however, point to an interesting (and significant) semantic distinction, within this text, of nominal and adjectival functions. 'Green' and 'red' have, in this text quite different functions; 'turf green' denotes a place or site, conceivably (like 'village green'), within the space of representation in black and white. The colour of 'red' is, however, here inextricable from 'hair.' This film-text has bled into colour, and the cascade of images contains a subtle cue which impels the fascinated spectator/I to register that passage in bleed, as if in positive reply to the anxious, mocking query of Dario Argentino, "Did you see everything – really clear, in colors?" "Oh yes, yes," shuddering, like 'Borges' seeing/reading through the Aleph/frame, the intimation of endless replication inscribed with "The Last Machine." What is it that, finally, blocks the chain of the visible? It is the appearance of the 'filled' shifter, the 'I' aiming his camera in countershot of the naked couple. Reflexivity reified staunches the hemorrhage of Imagination.

Text II. *Nostalgia,* 1971. Film, 16mm., black and white, sound, running time: 36 minutes. One dozen photographs, exposed, then burnt on screen, their subjects and circumstances of making narrated in first person by the maker/author, this *bildungsroman* spoken by a second voice; each image out of synch with its account, so that text and image in superimposition produce a temporal torsion. Reminiscence, narrative, iconographic *exercices de style* succeed each other, ending with the account of a photograph in which "*Something invisible to me,*" reflected in a window and reflected once again in a rearview mirror attached to a vehicle, the smallest of details, subsequently enlarged, "hopelessly ambiguous in which hides a dread, a loathing such that I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again." And we are given to see on the blank, black screen, the faceless, nameless image for which each spectator has a face or Name.

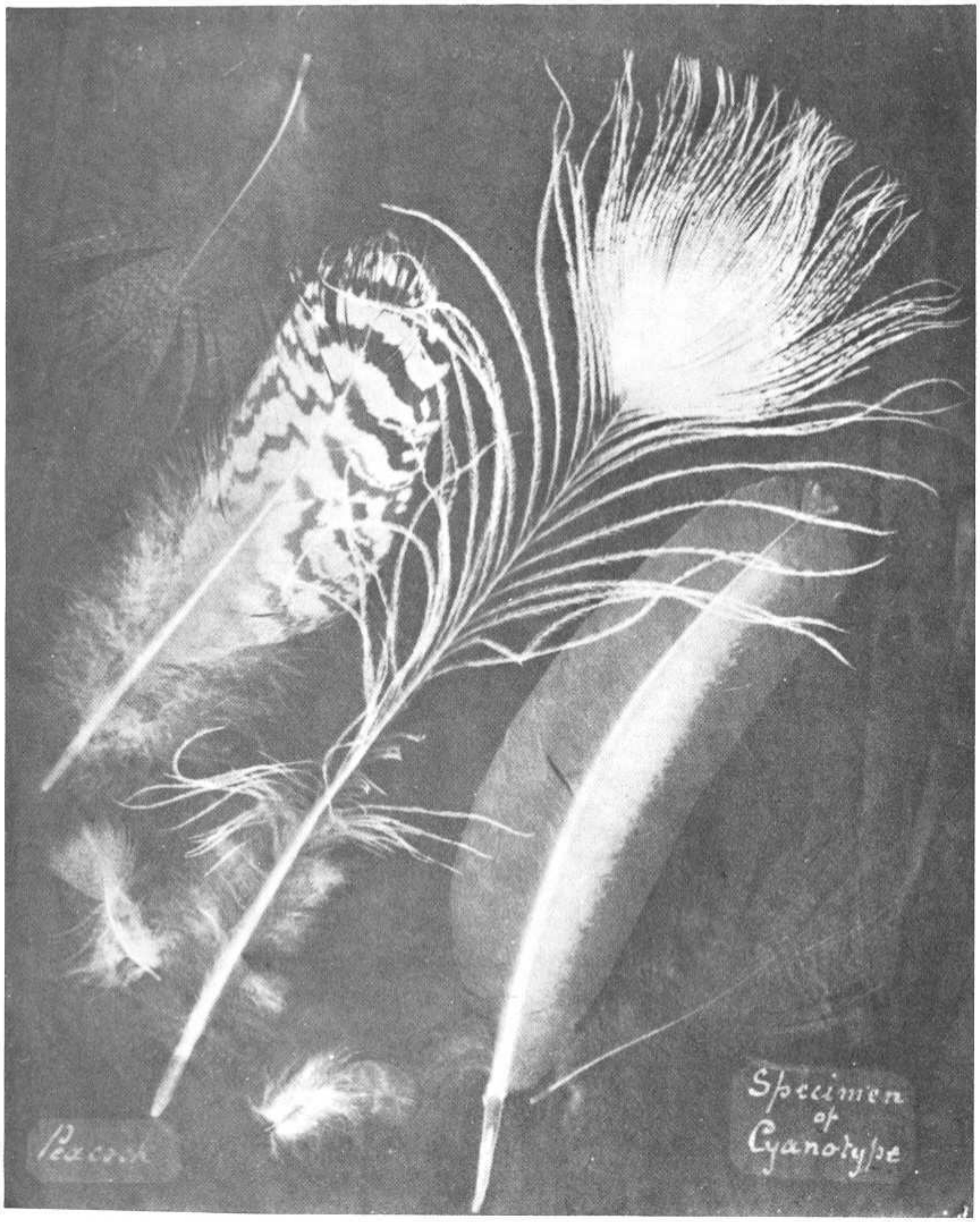
It has long seemed that photography and then cinematography, with their promise of imminent revelation, would provide access to the nature of the recesses of the phenomenal world, as if the revisions of perception and judgment impelled by that access would act as corrective to empirical fictions. Jean Epstein remarked a half-century ago, that "little or no attention has been paid until now to the many unique qualities film can give to the representation of things. Hardly anyone has realised that the cinematic image carries a warning of something monstrous, that it bears a subtle venom which could corrupt the entire rational order so painstakingly imagined in the destiny of the universe." Frampton, revivifying for us the Stoic discourse, has restored to the theory of mechanical reproduction its alethiological function. It is the venom's antidote.

Annette Michelson

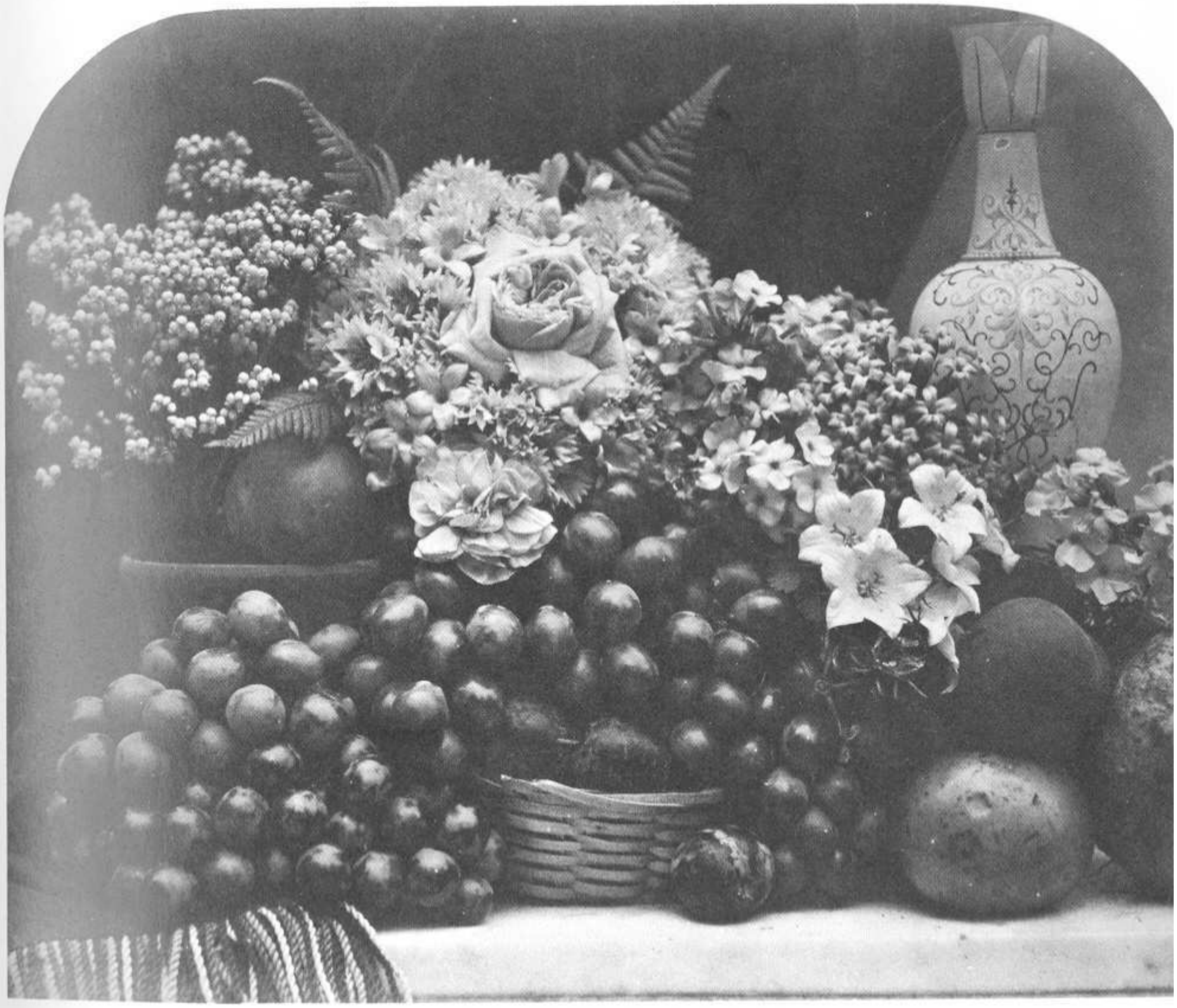
PLATES


Souvenirs d'Artistes.
367
PHOTOGRAPHIE
NADAR
PHOTOGRAPHIE
PHOTOGRAPHIE
APHIE
PHOTOG
PHOTOGRA
IMP. BERTAUTS, PARIS
NADAR élevant la Photographie à la hauteur de l'Art

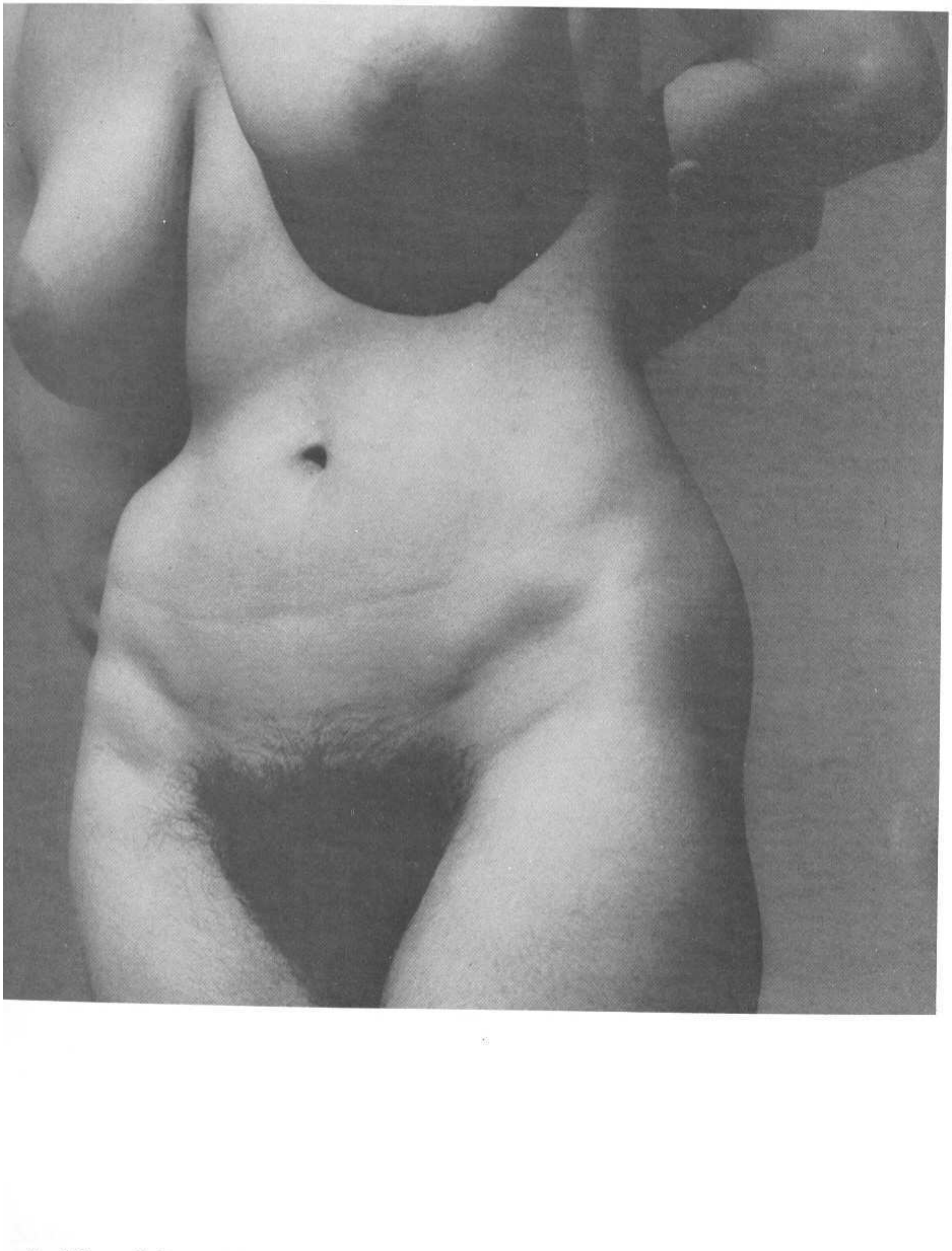
Honoré Daumier, *Nadar raising photography to the level of Art*, 1862.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.


Peacock
Specimen
of
Cyanotype

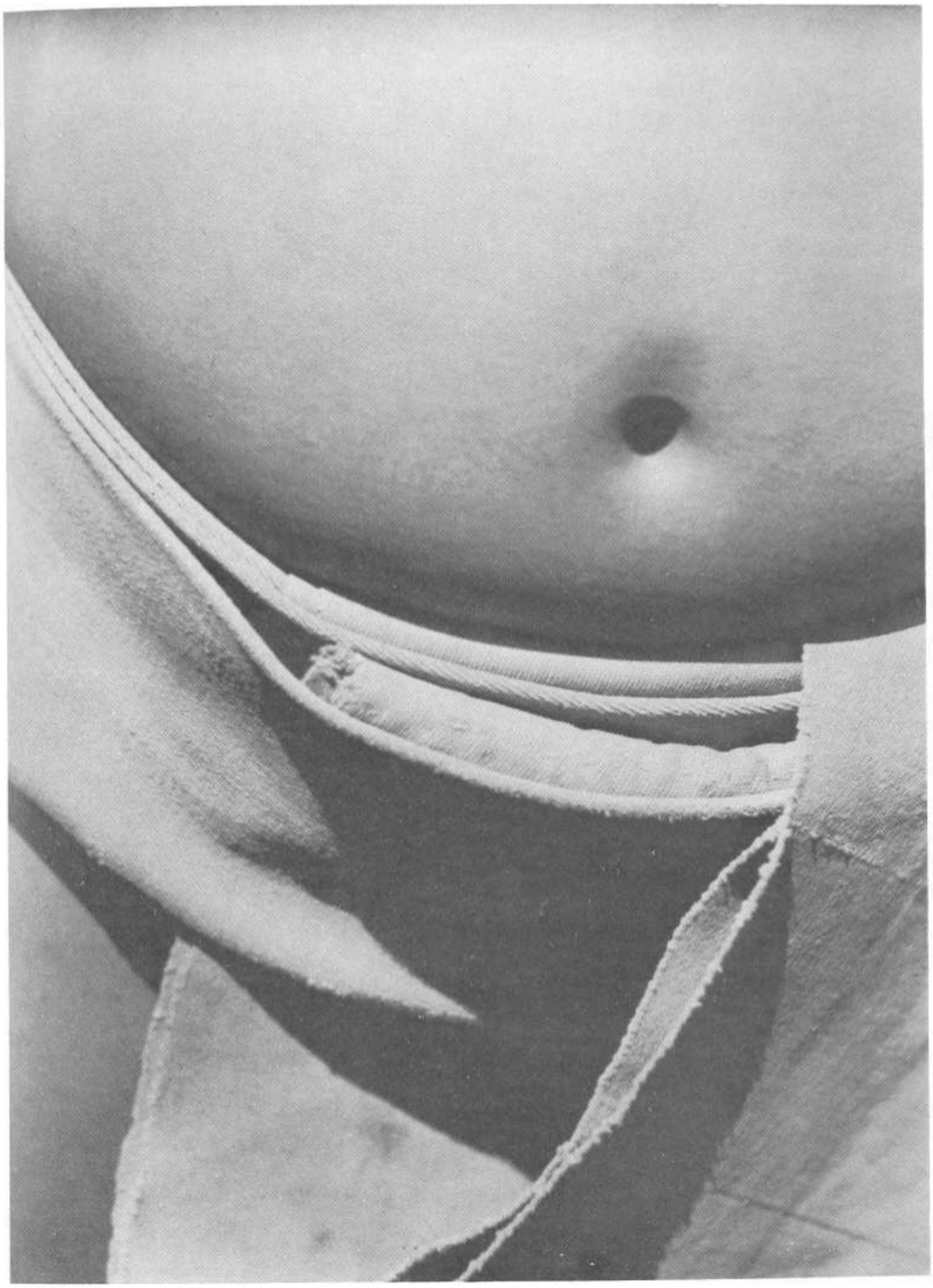
Sir John Herschel, *Cyanotype of Peacock Feathers*, 1845. Photography Collection, Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin.



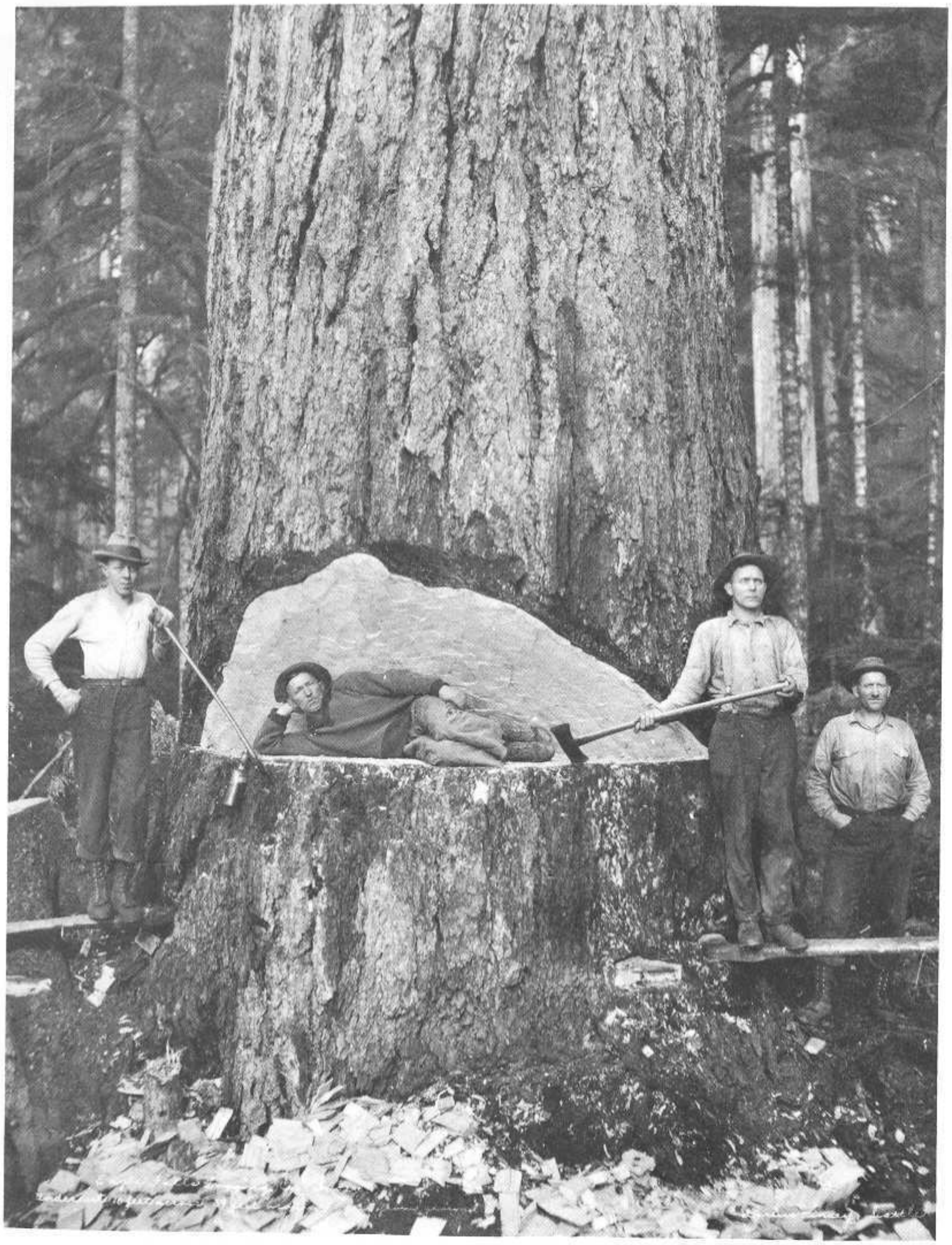
Roger Fenton, *Flowers and Fruit*, 1853-60.
Collection, Royal Photographic Society, Great Britain.



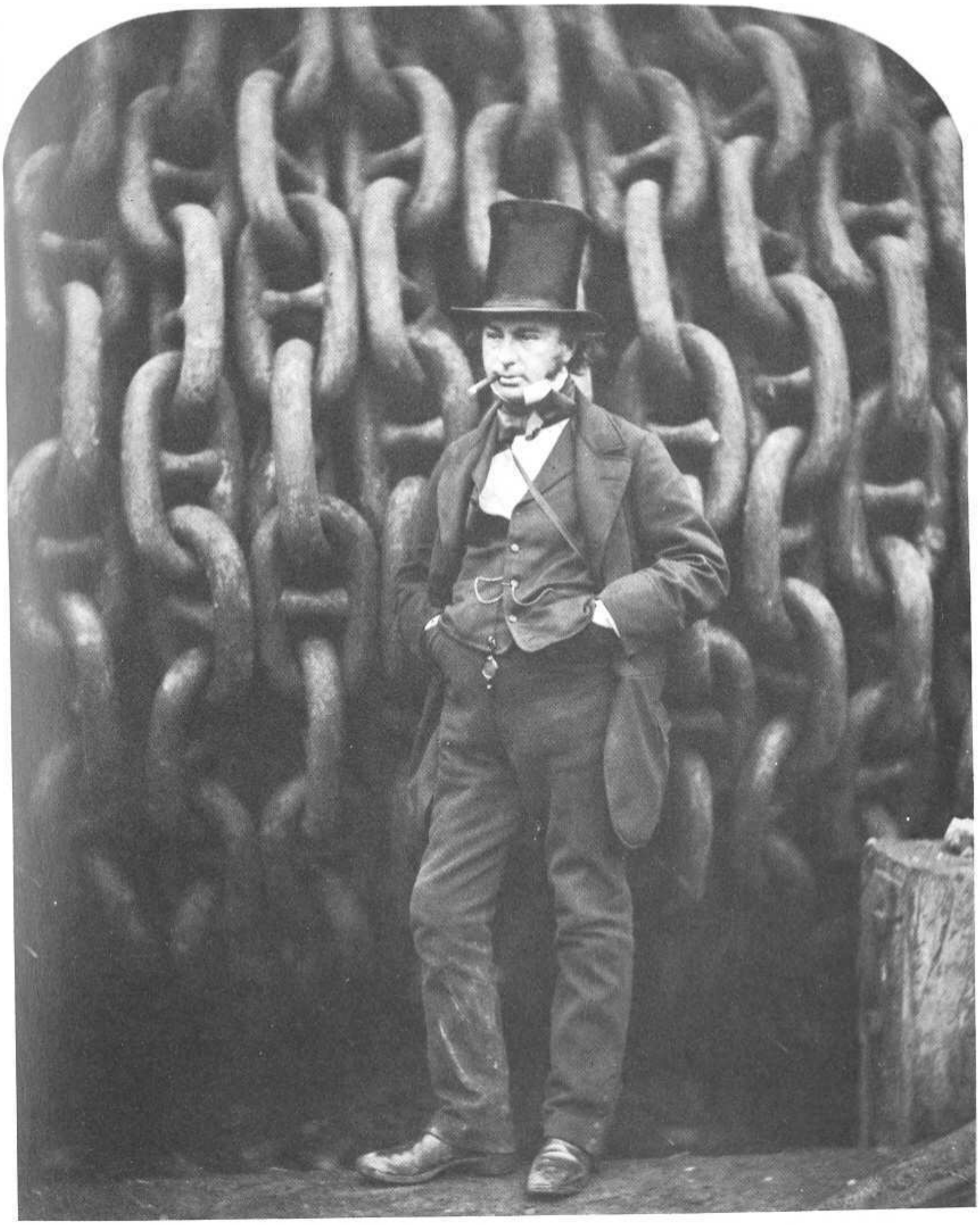
Paul Strand, *Torso, Taos, New Mexico*, 1930.
Collection, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.



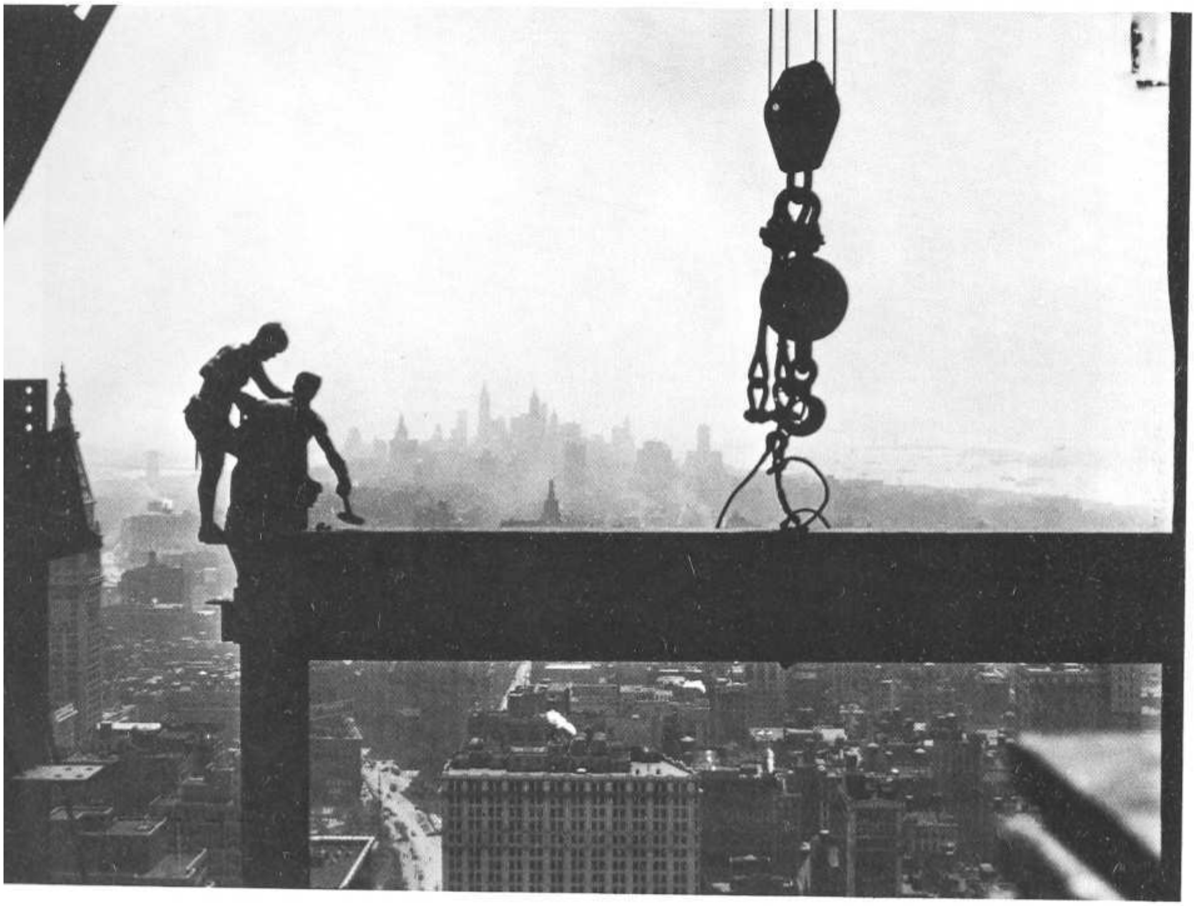
Margrethe Mather, (Japanese Wrestler's Body) *Untitled*, 1927.
Collection, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.



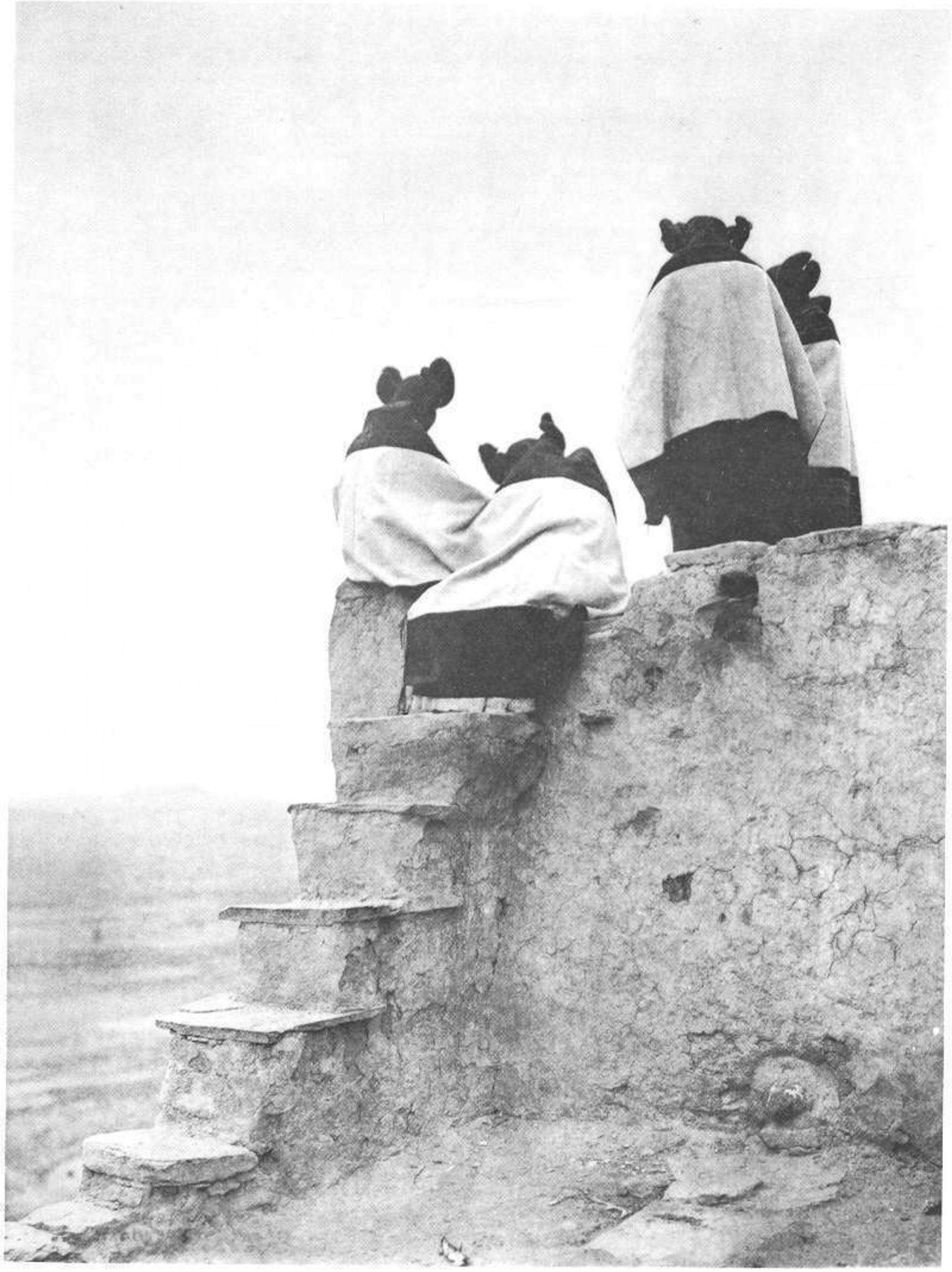
Darius Kinsey, *Eagle Falls Logging Company*, c. 1924.
Collection, Whatcom Museum Archive.



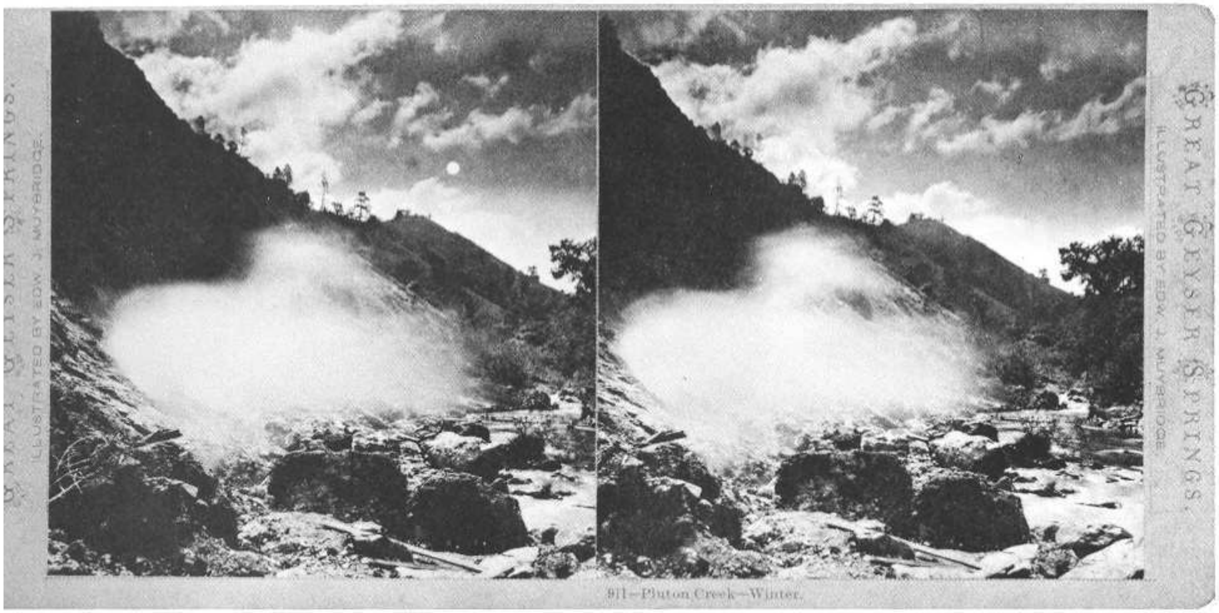
Robert Howlett, *Isambard Kingdom Brunel, builder of the steamship* Great Eastern, 1857.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.



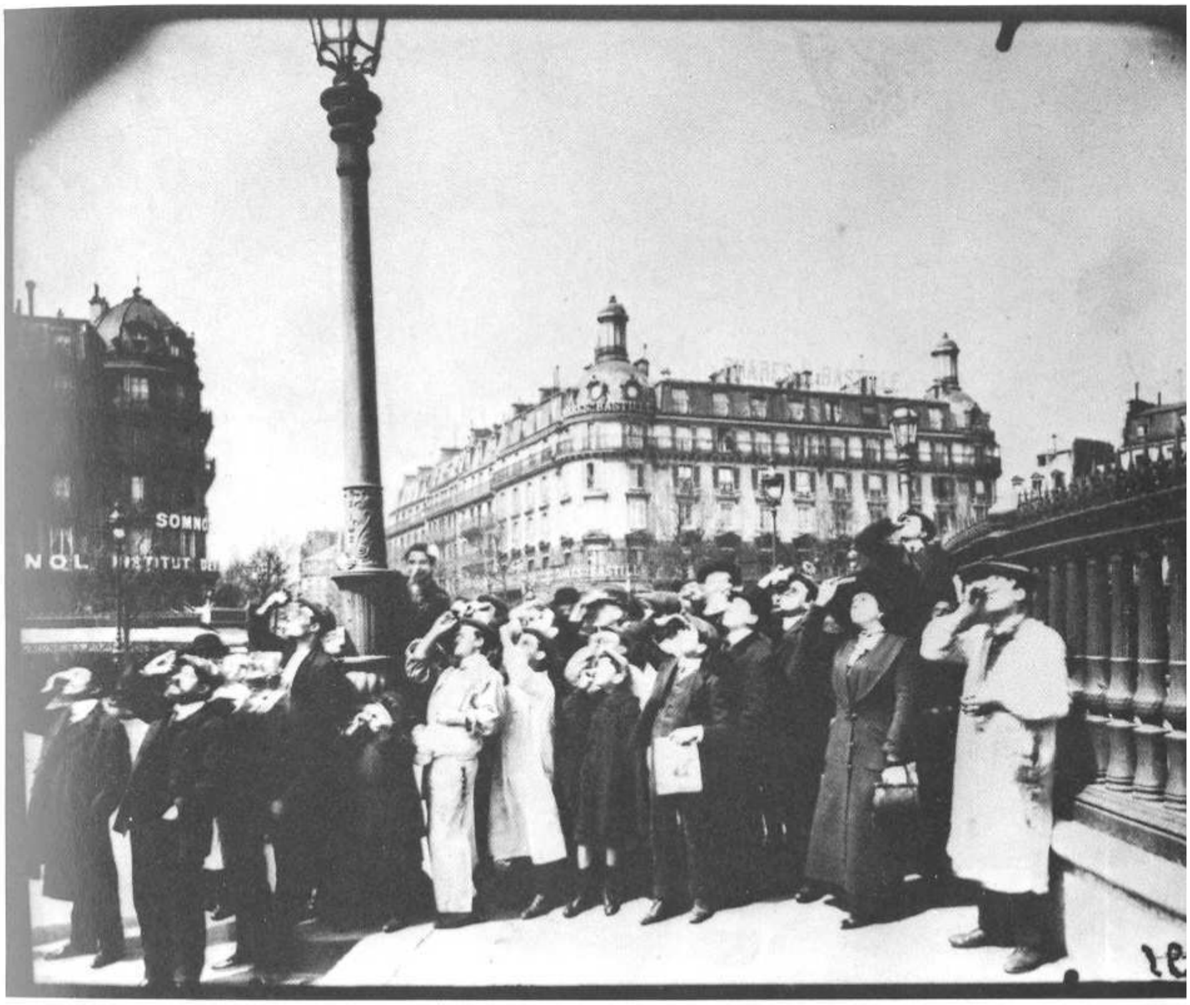
Lewis Hine, *Laying a Beam*, 1931.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.



Edward S. Curtis, *Hopi, Watching the Dancers*, 1906.
Collection, Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University.


GREAT GEYSER SPRINGS.
ILLUSTRATED BY EDW. J. MUYBRIDGE
911—Pluton Creek—Winter.

Eadweard Muybridge, *Pluton Creek – Winter*, n.d.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.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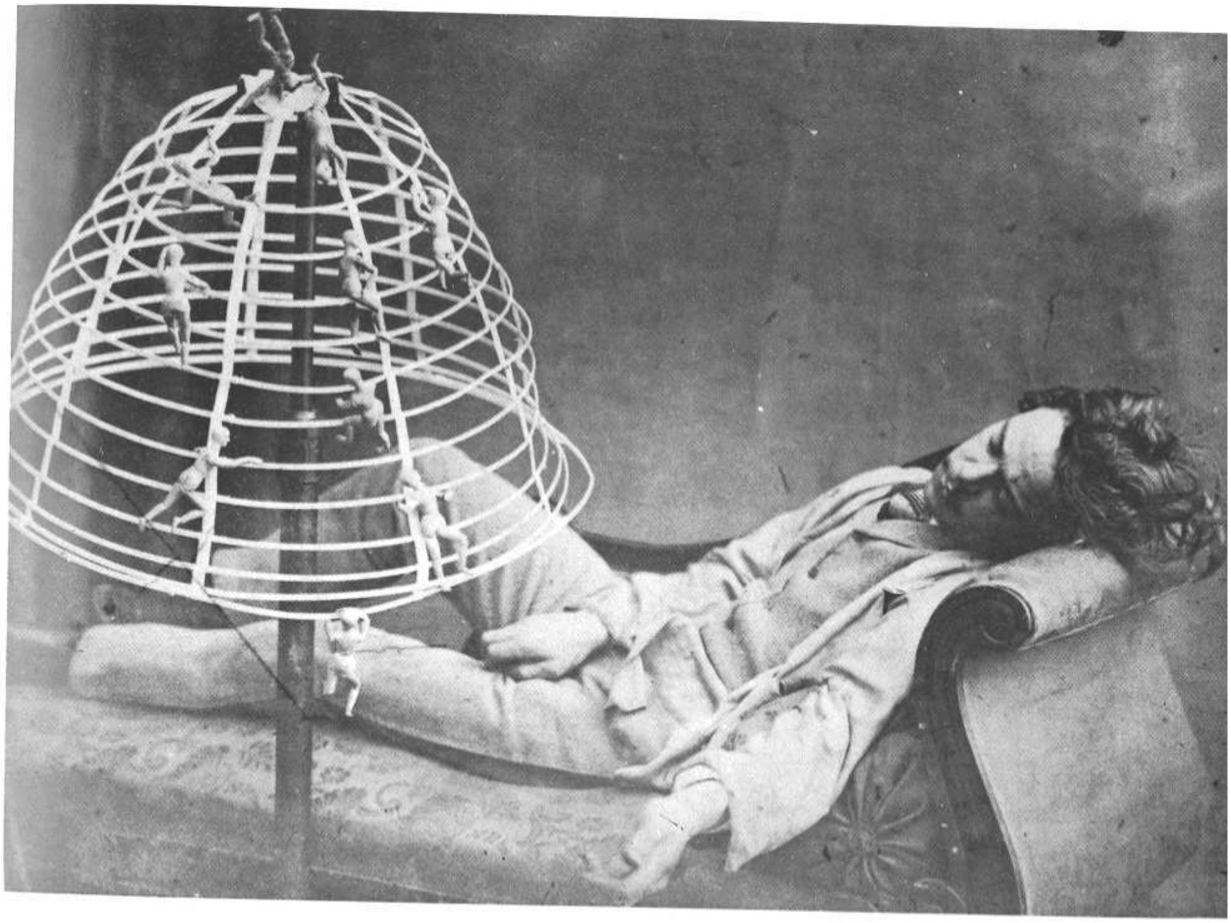
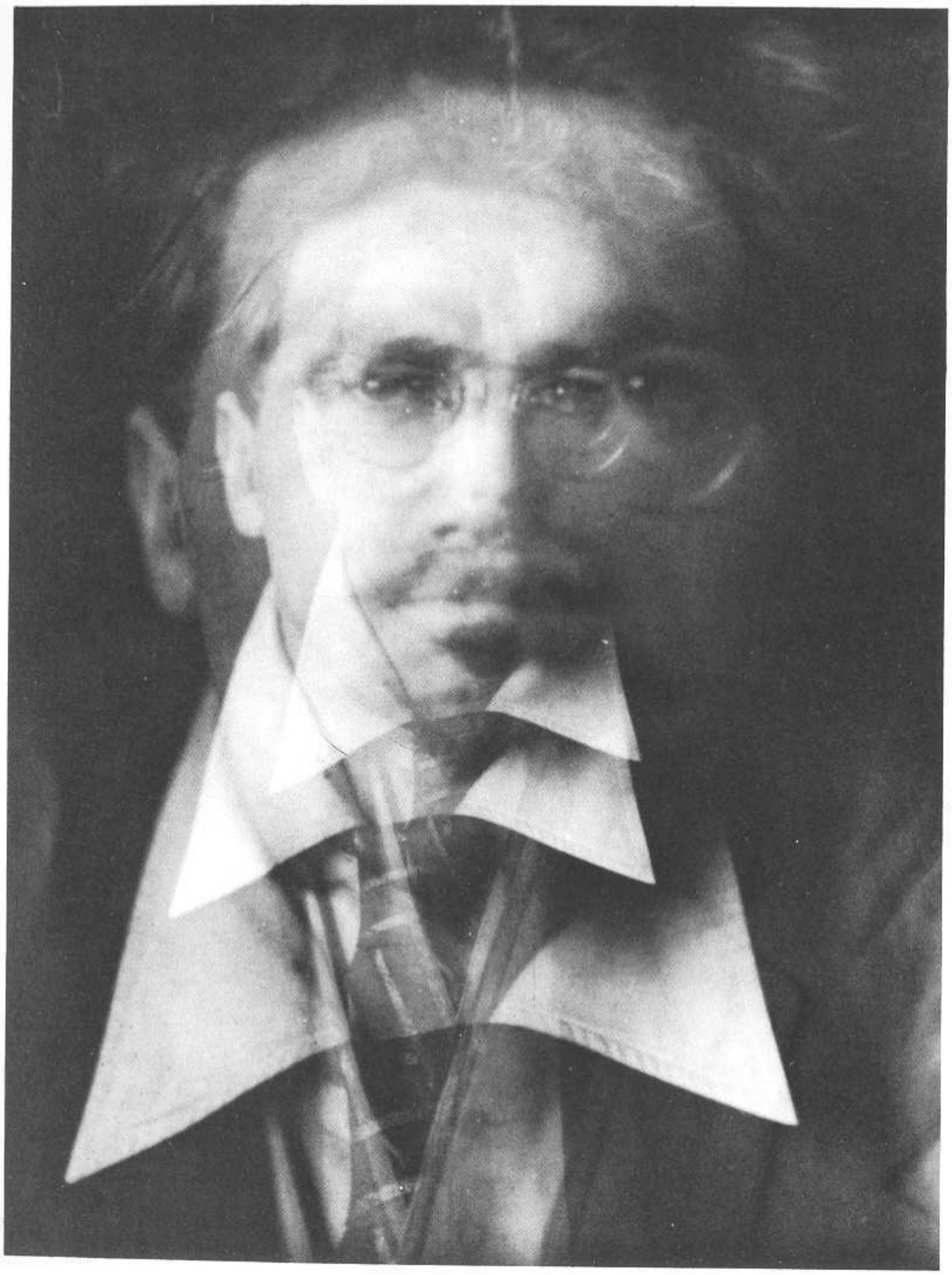
Eugene Atget, *(Crowd Watching An Eclipse of the Sun)*, c. 1910.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.

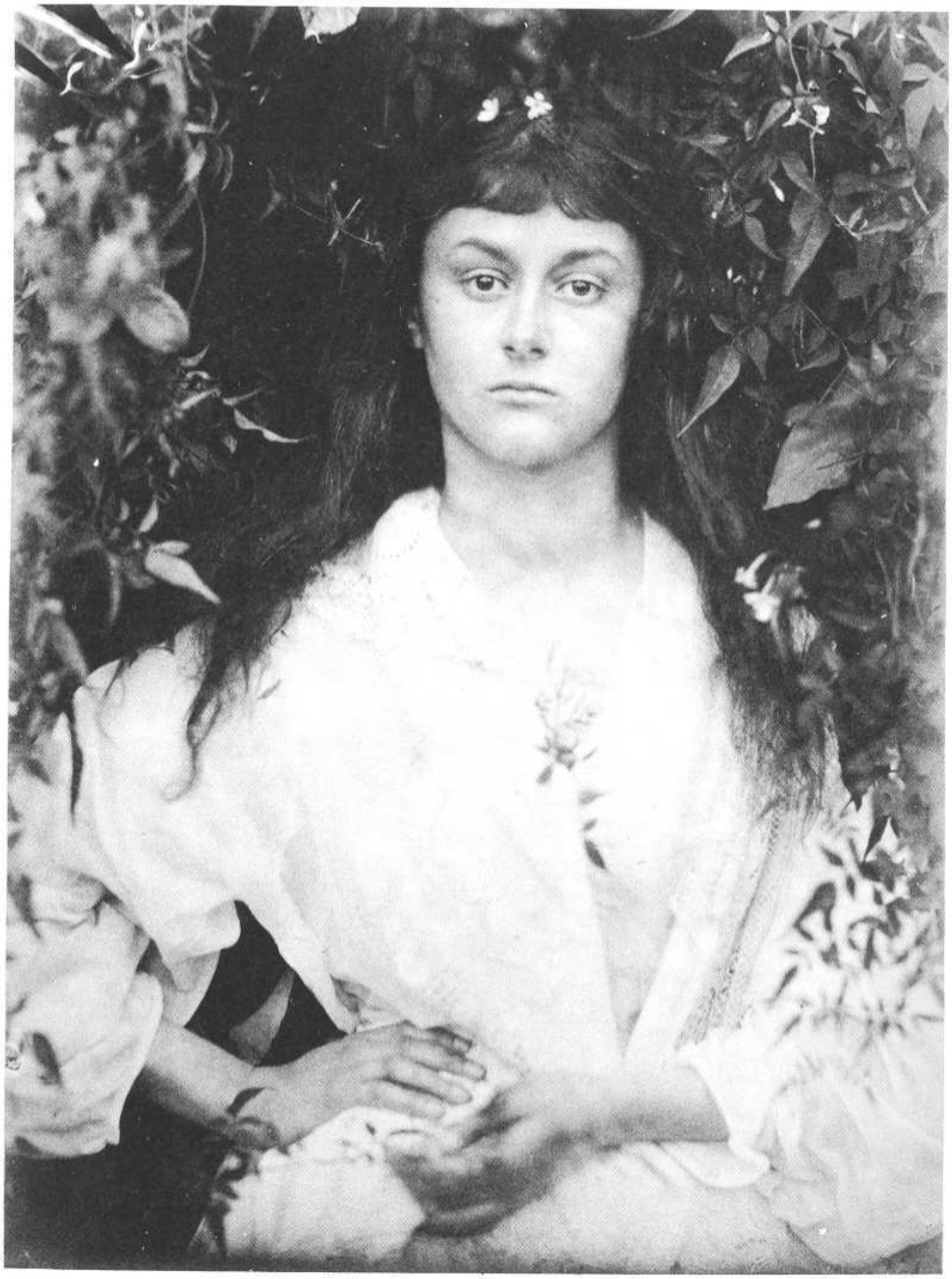
Bernice Abbott, *James Joyce,* 1928.
Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the photographer.



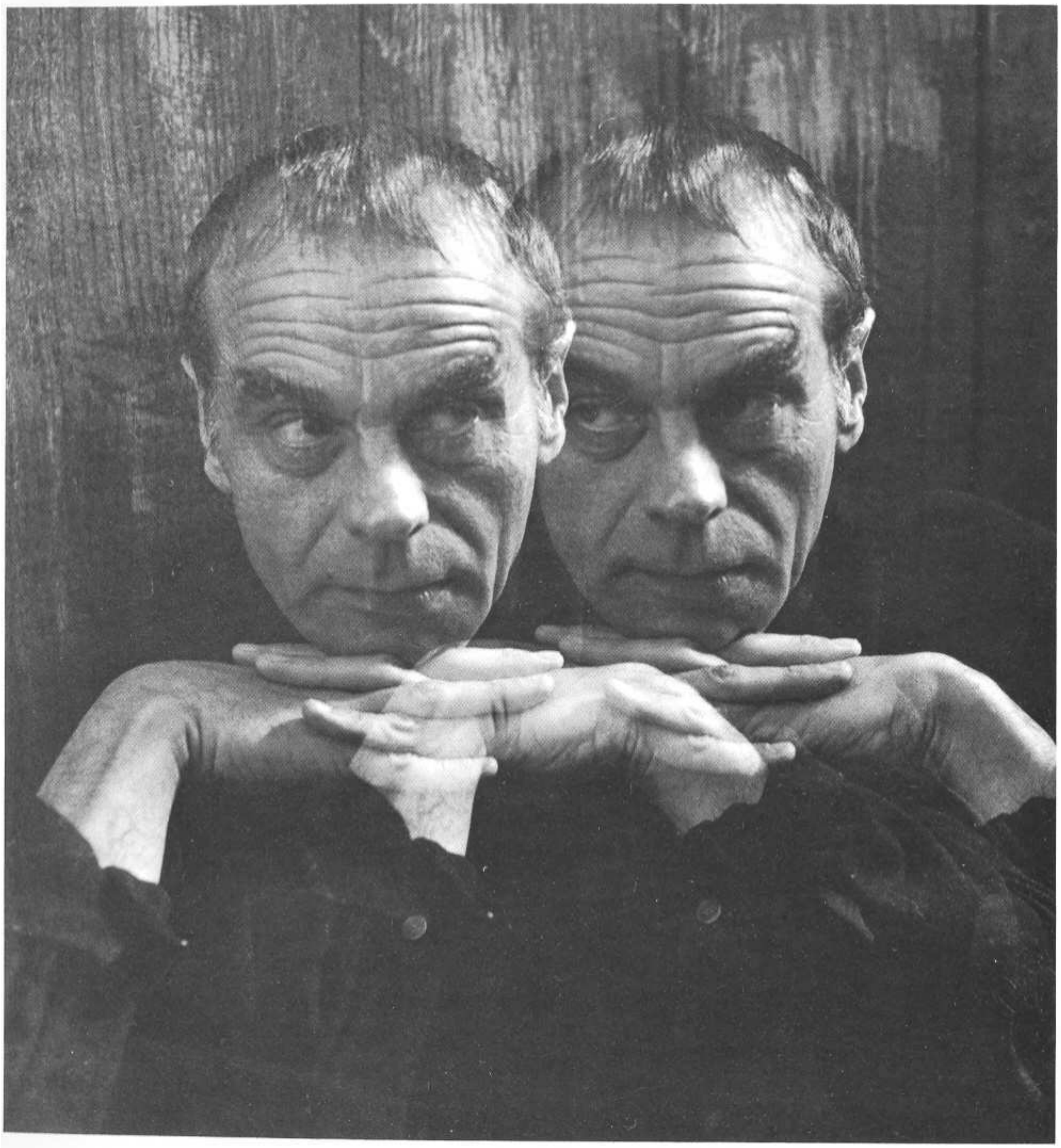
O.G. Rejlander, *The Dream*, c. 1860.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.



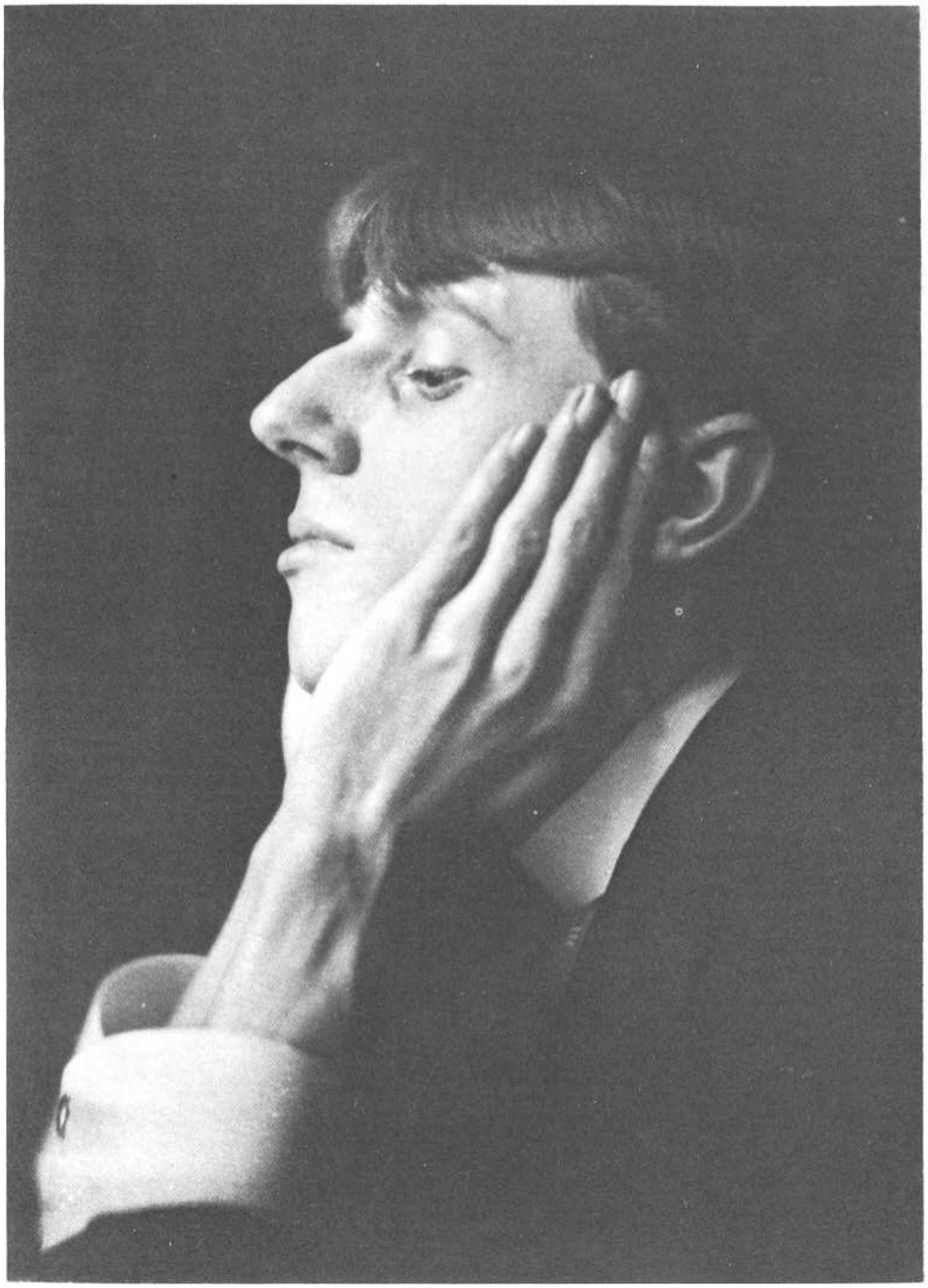
Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Ezra Pound*, 1916.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.



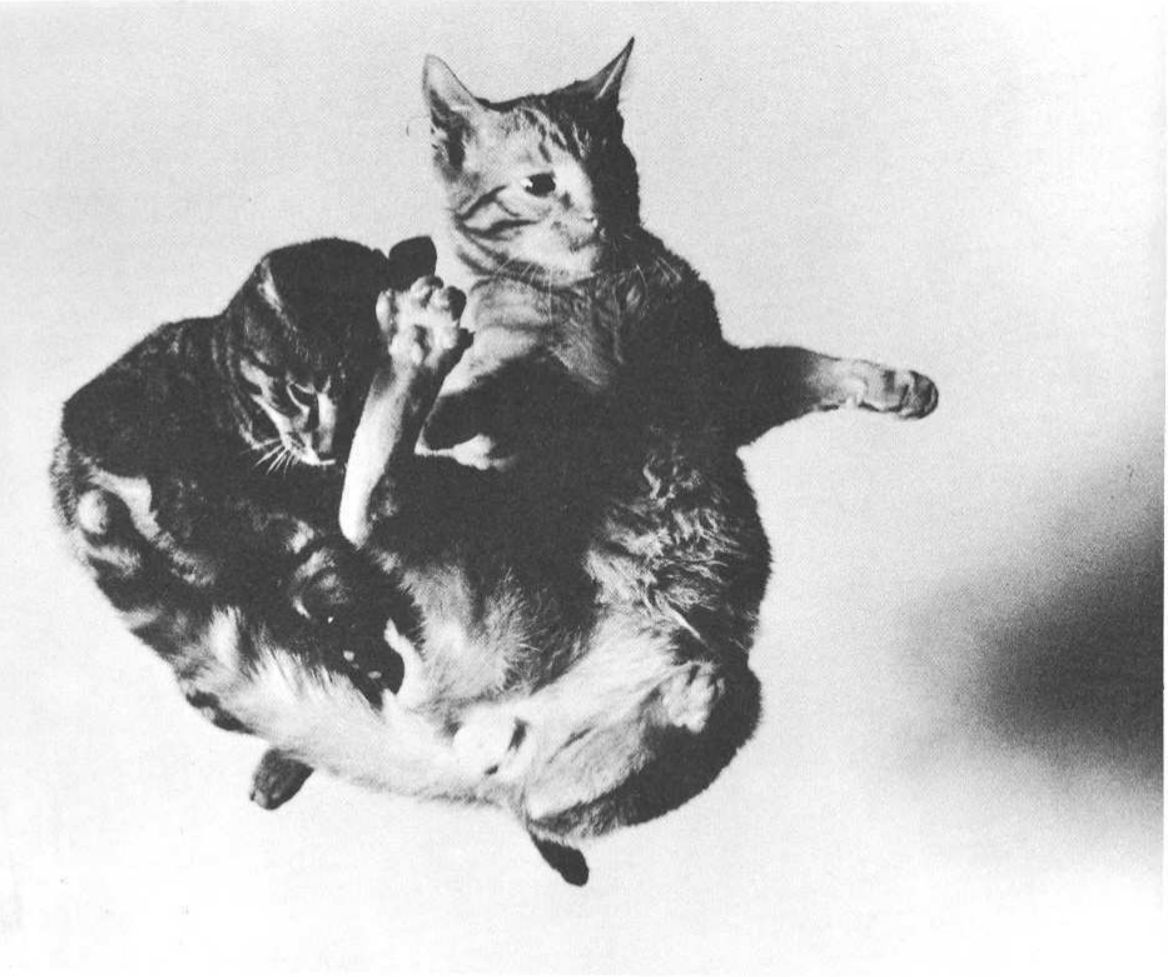
Julia Margaret Cameron, *Alice Liddell,* 1872.
Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 1963.



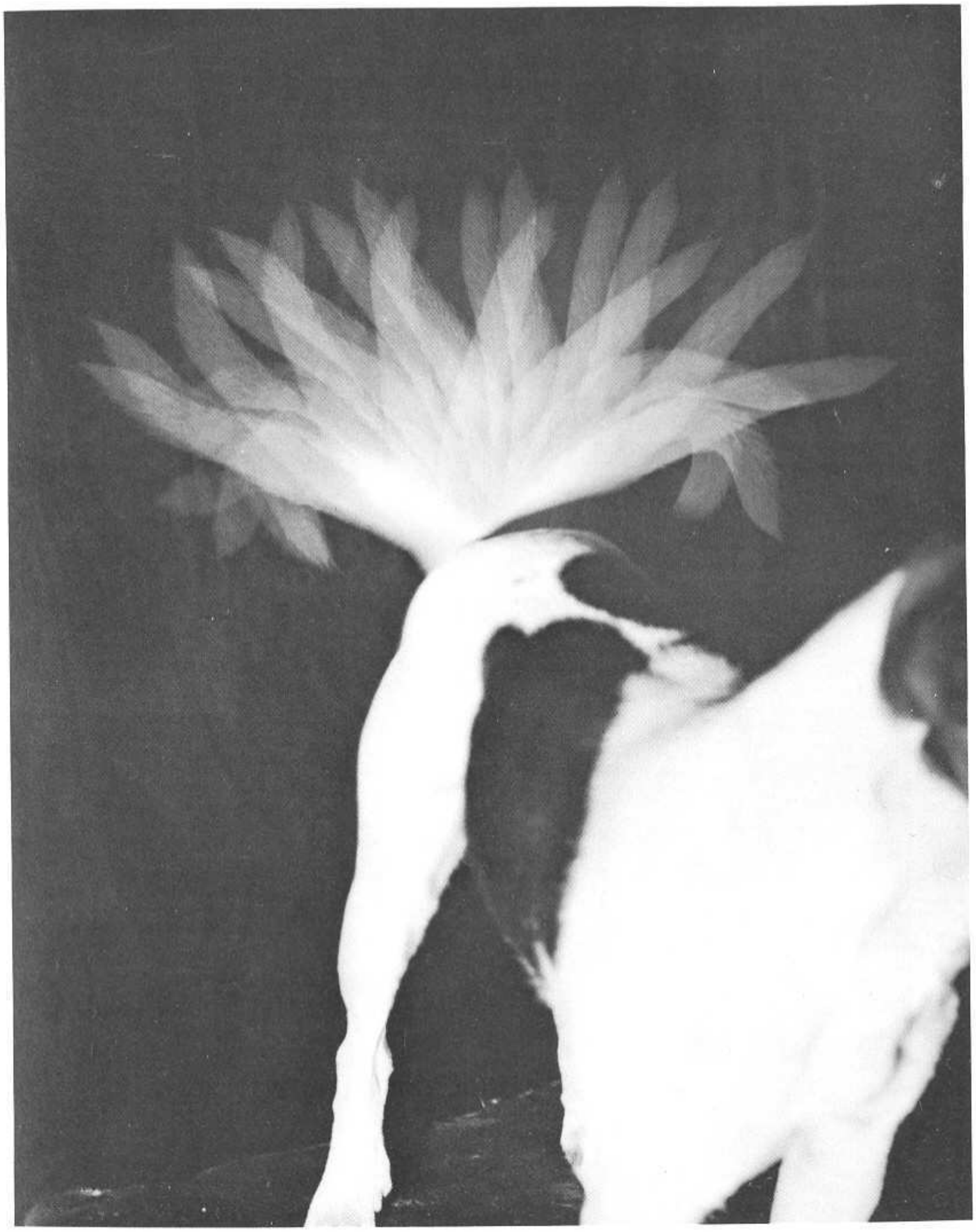
Imogen Cunningham, *The Poet and His Alter Ego (James Broughton, Poet and Filmmaker)*, 1962.
Courtesy of the Imogen Cunningham Trust.



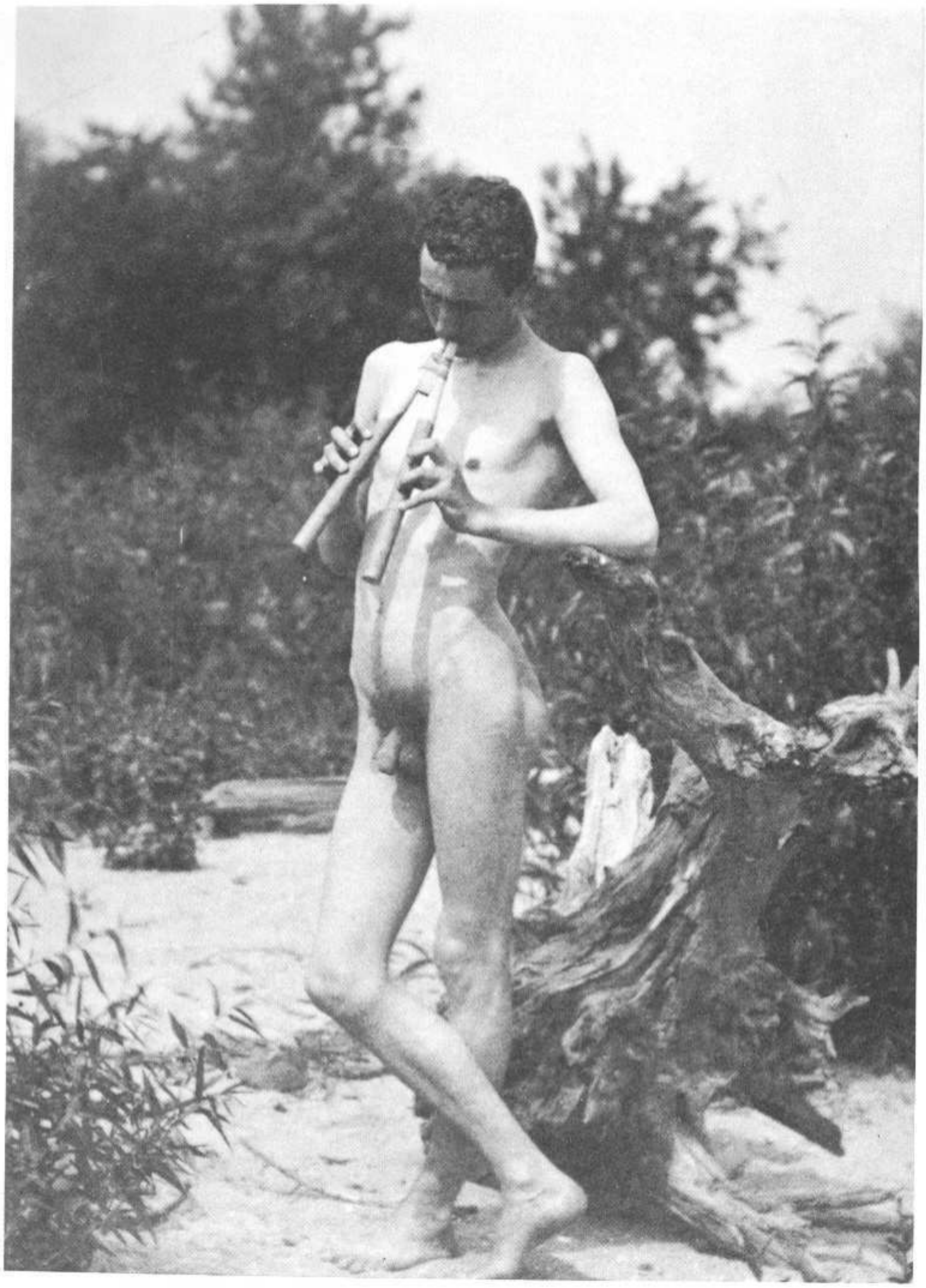
Frederick H. Evans, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 1895.
Collection, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.



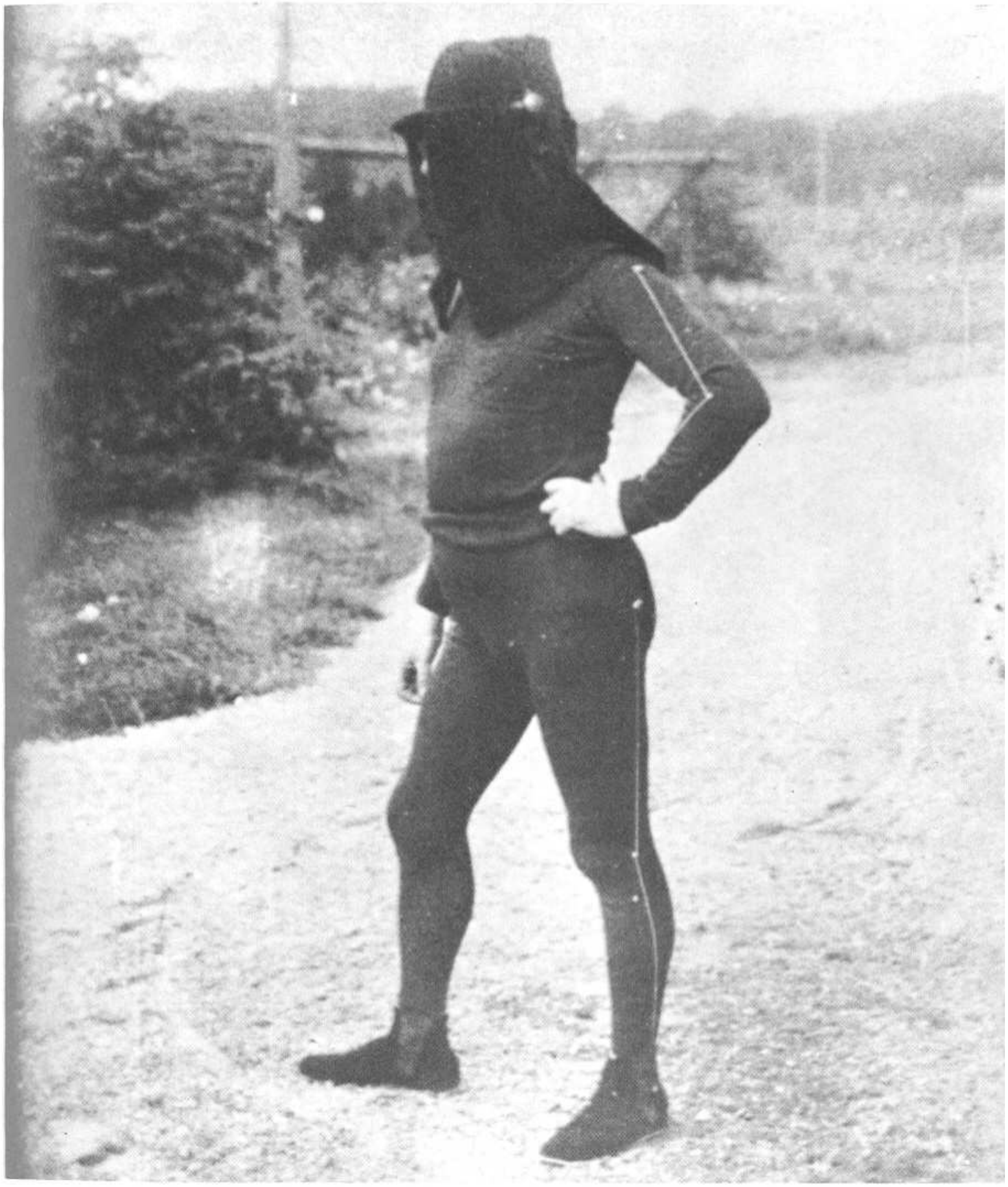
Barbara Morgan, *Tossed Cats*, 1942.



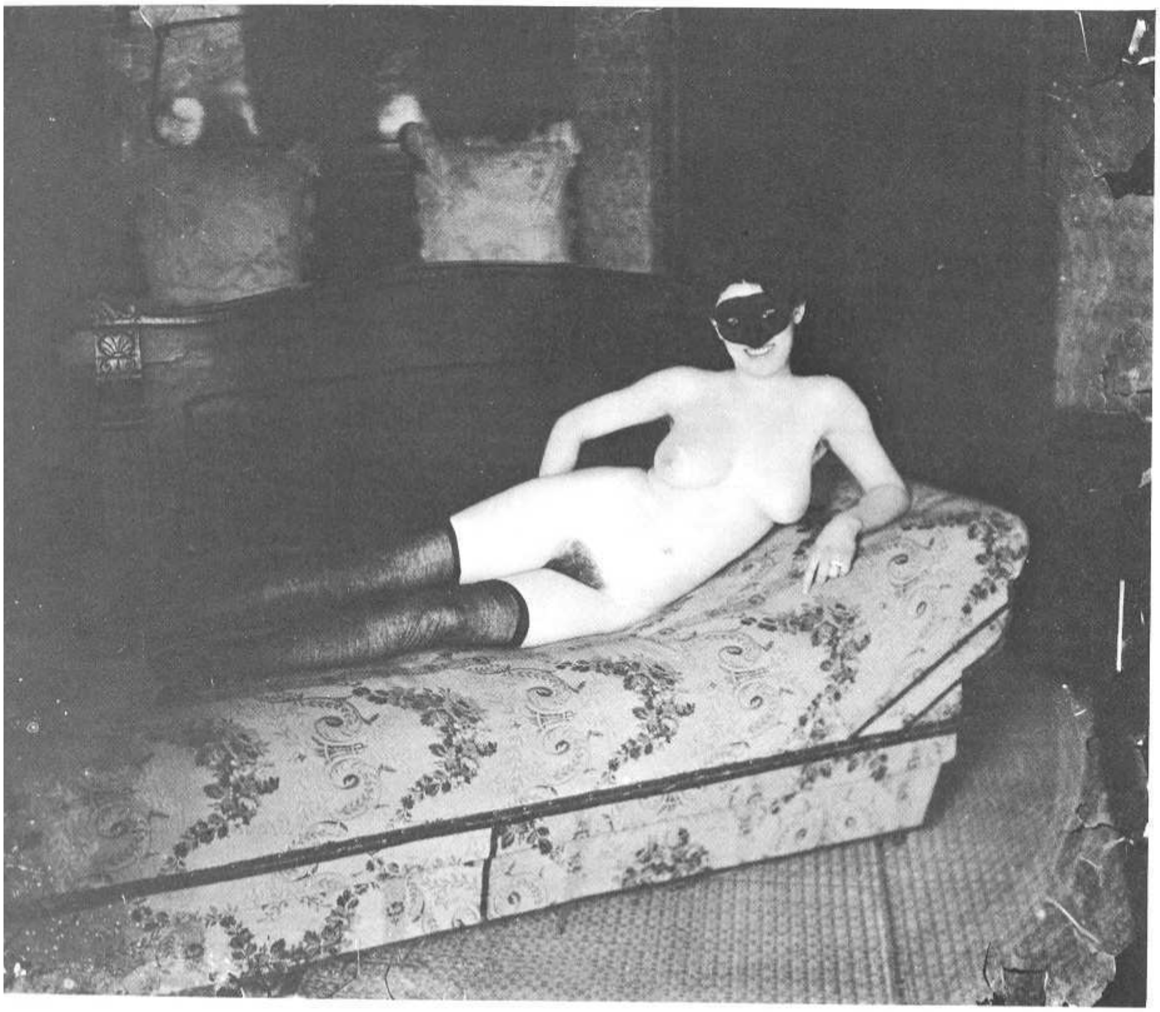
Harold E. Edgerton, *(multiflash) of a dog's tail wagging*, before 1939.
Dr. Harold E. Edgerton, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



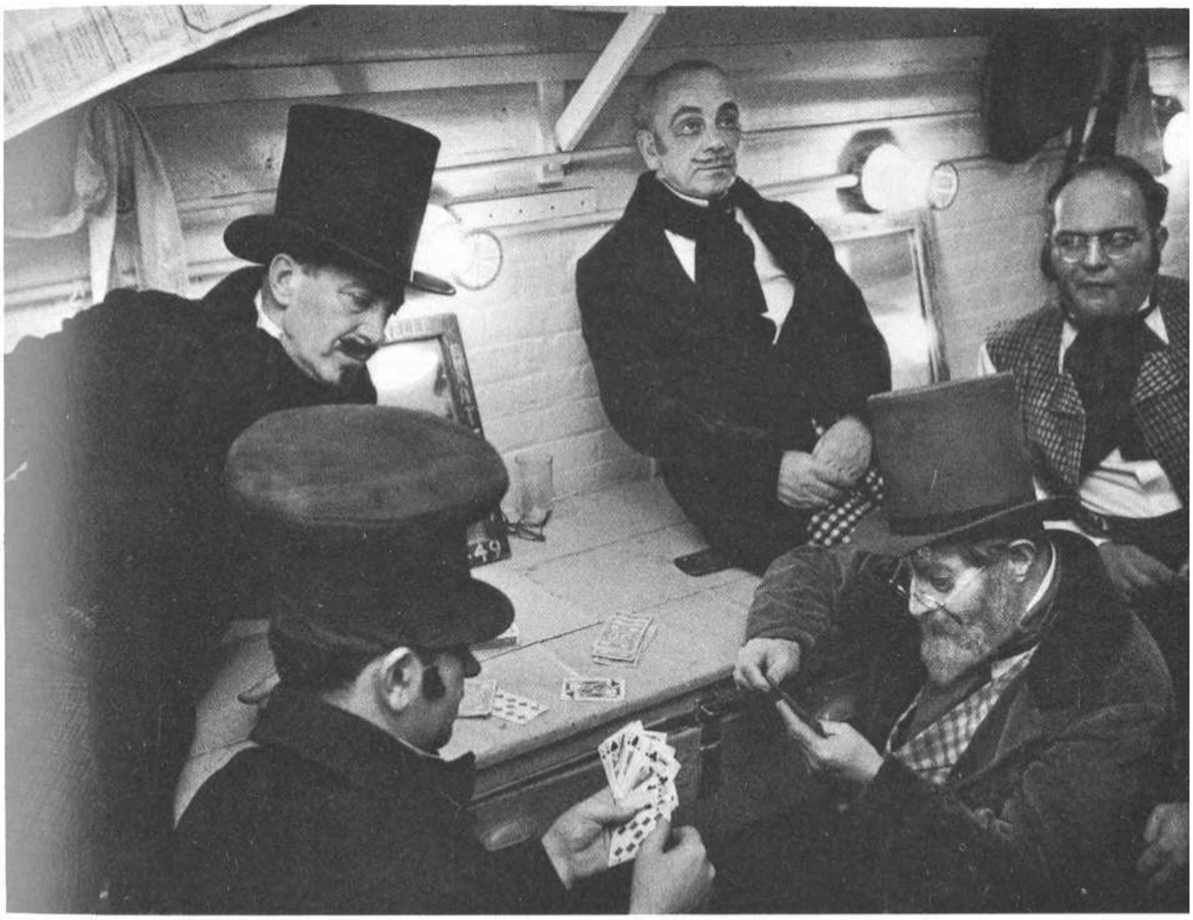
Thomas Eakins, *Study for Arcadia*, 1883.
Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, David A. McAlpin Fund, 1943.



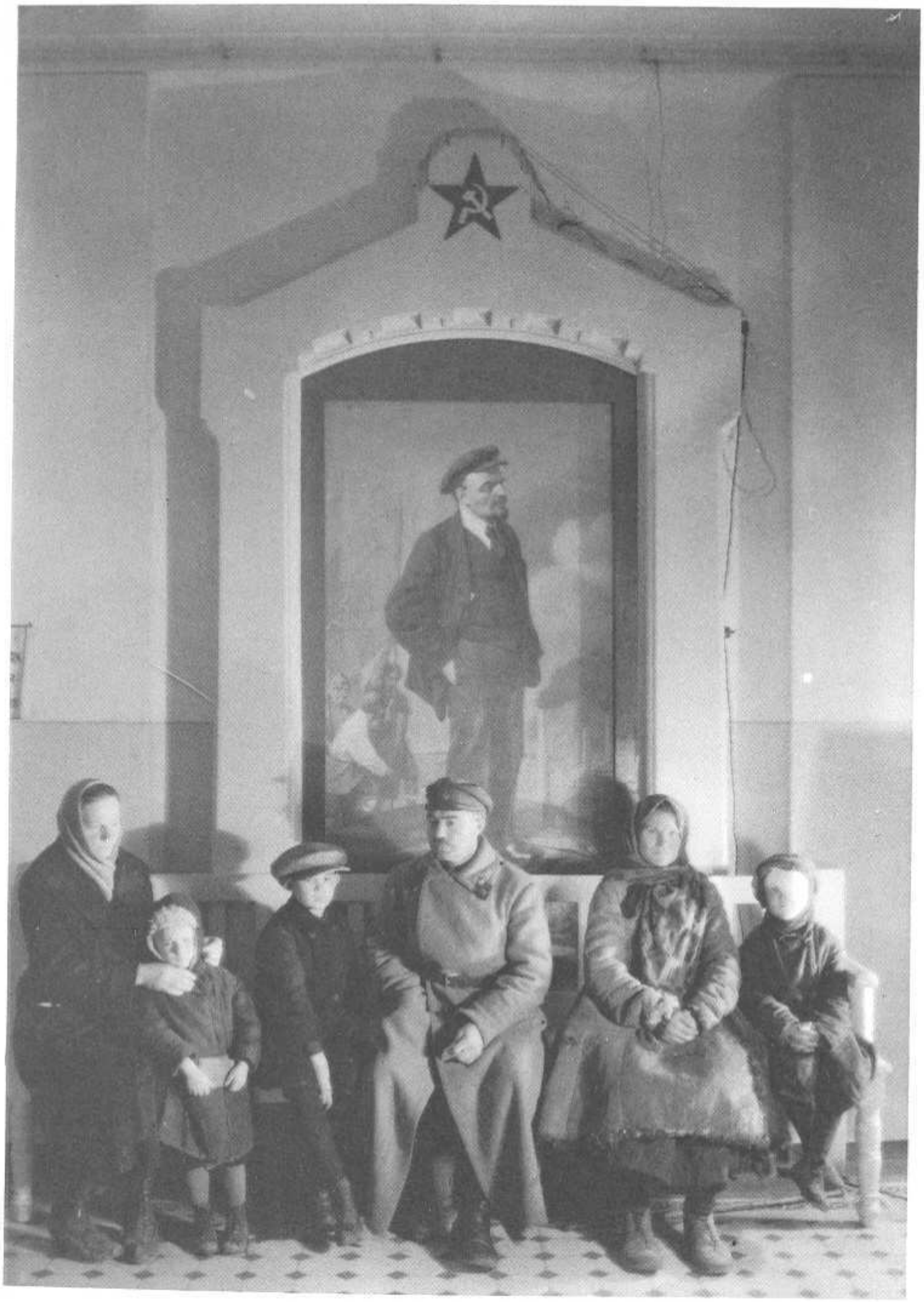
E.J. Marey, *Man dressed, for photographic experiment, in black costume with white lines along limbs*, 1883.
Collection, Musée Marey de Beaune, Depot du college de France.



E.J. Bellocq, *(Portrait of Storyville Prostitute)* c. 1912.
Courtesy of Lee Friedlander.

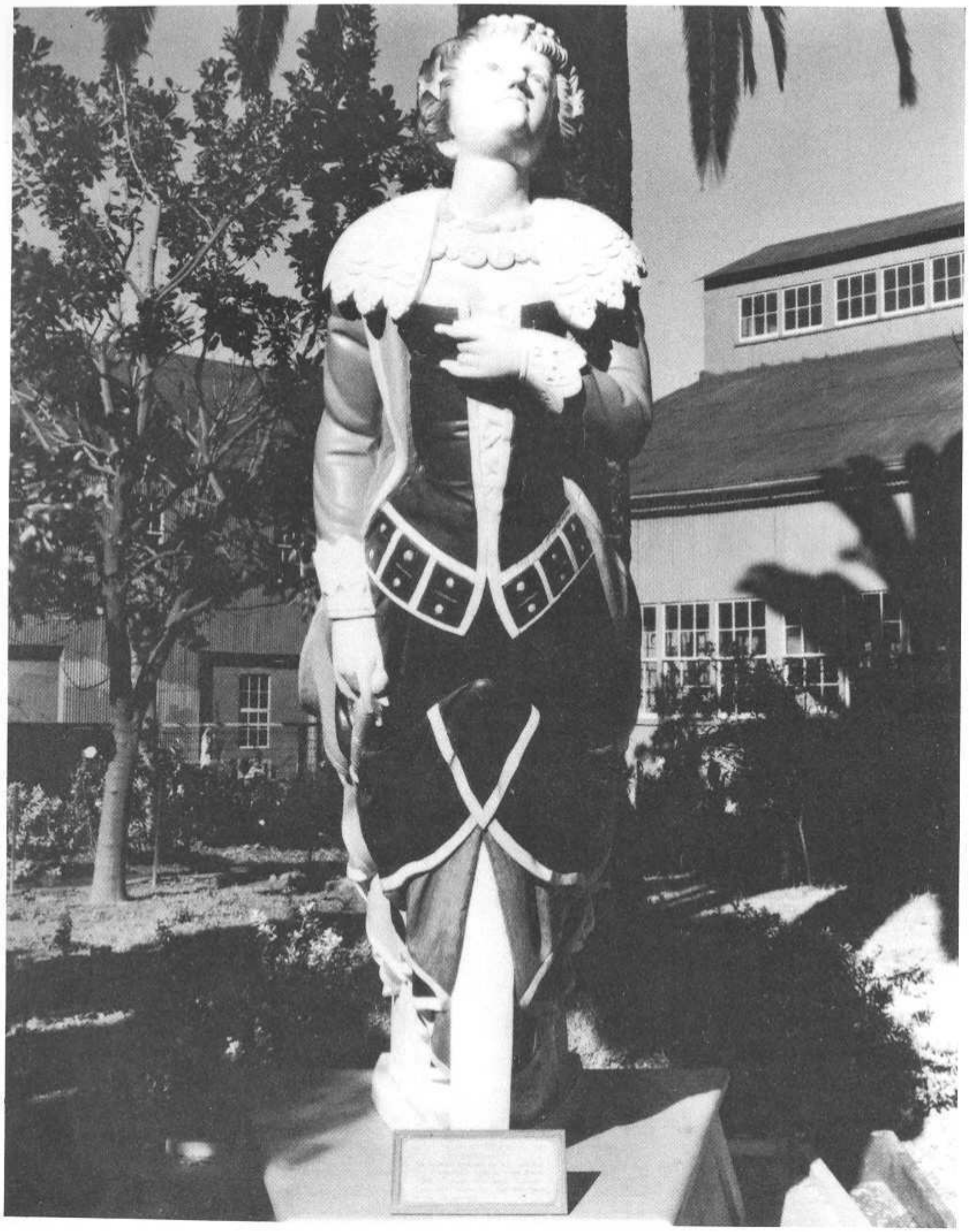


W. Eugene Smith, *Dressing Room, Metropolitan Opera*, 1953.
Collection, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

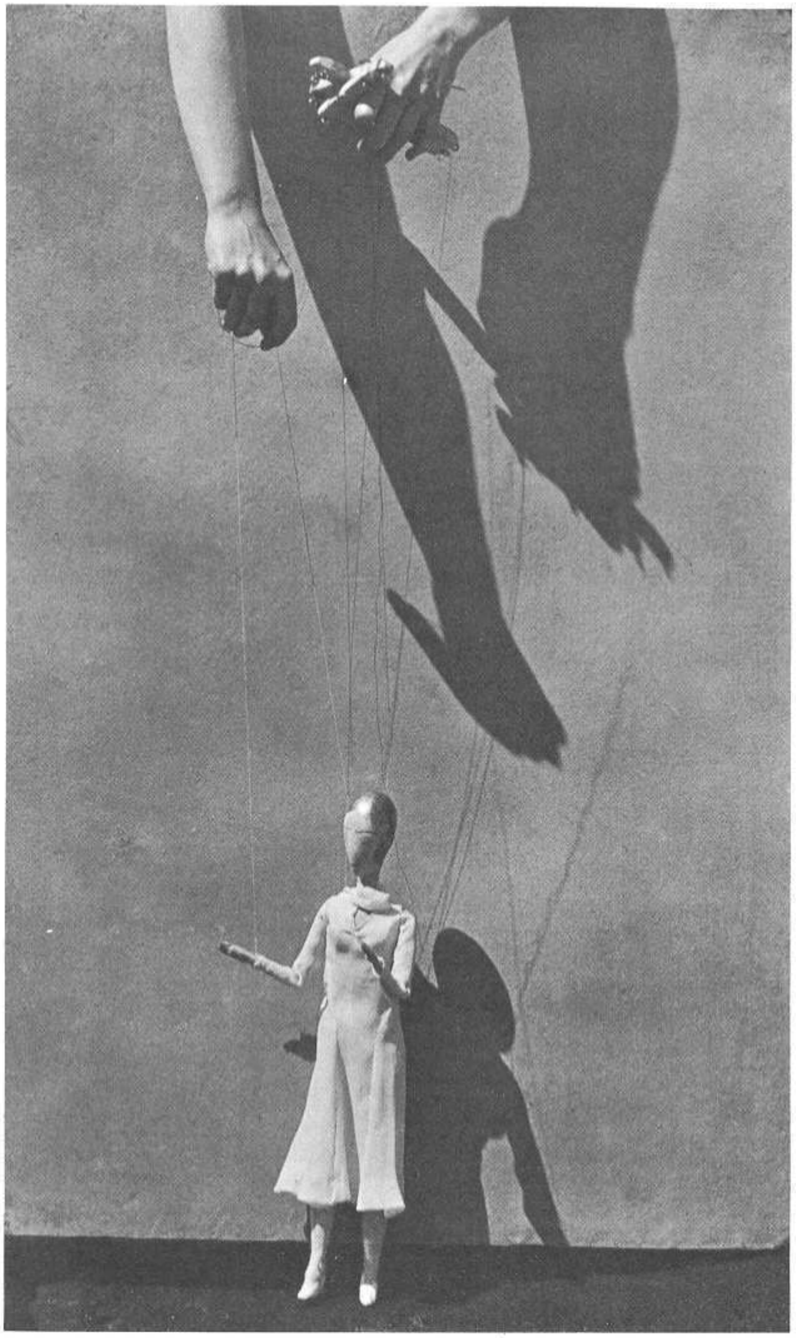


Margaret Bourke-White, *Waiting Their Turn: Children's Clinic, Moscow*, 1931. Collection, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.

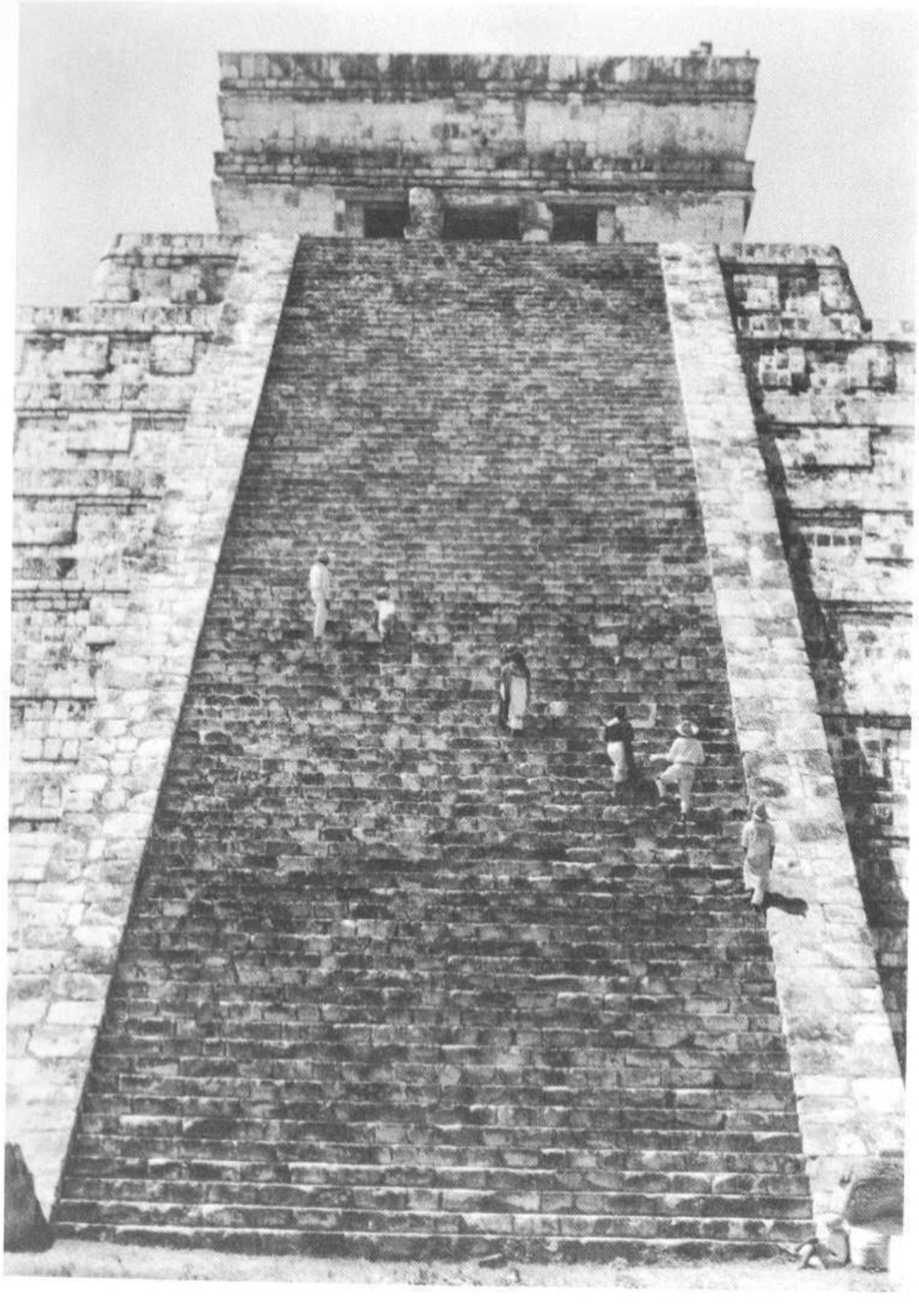
André Kertesz, *Eisenstein*, 1929-30.
Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the photographer.



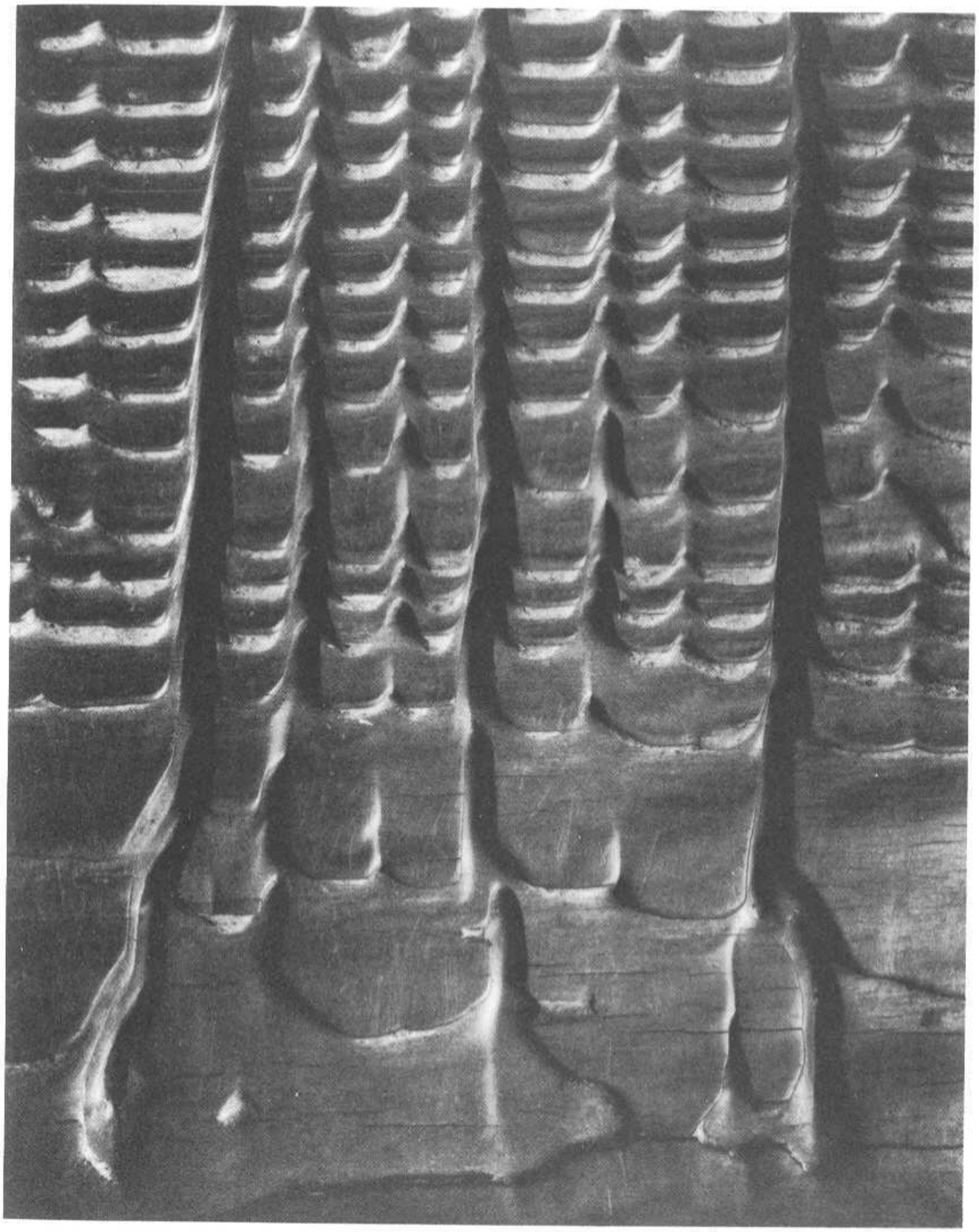
Sonya Noskowiak, *Untitled,* 1930.
Collection, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.



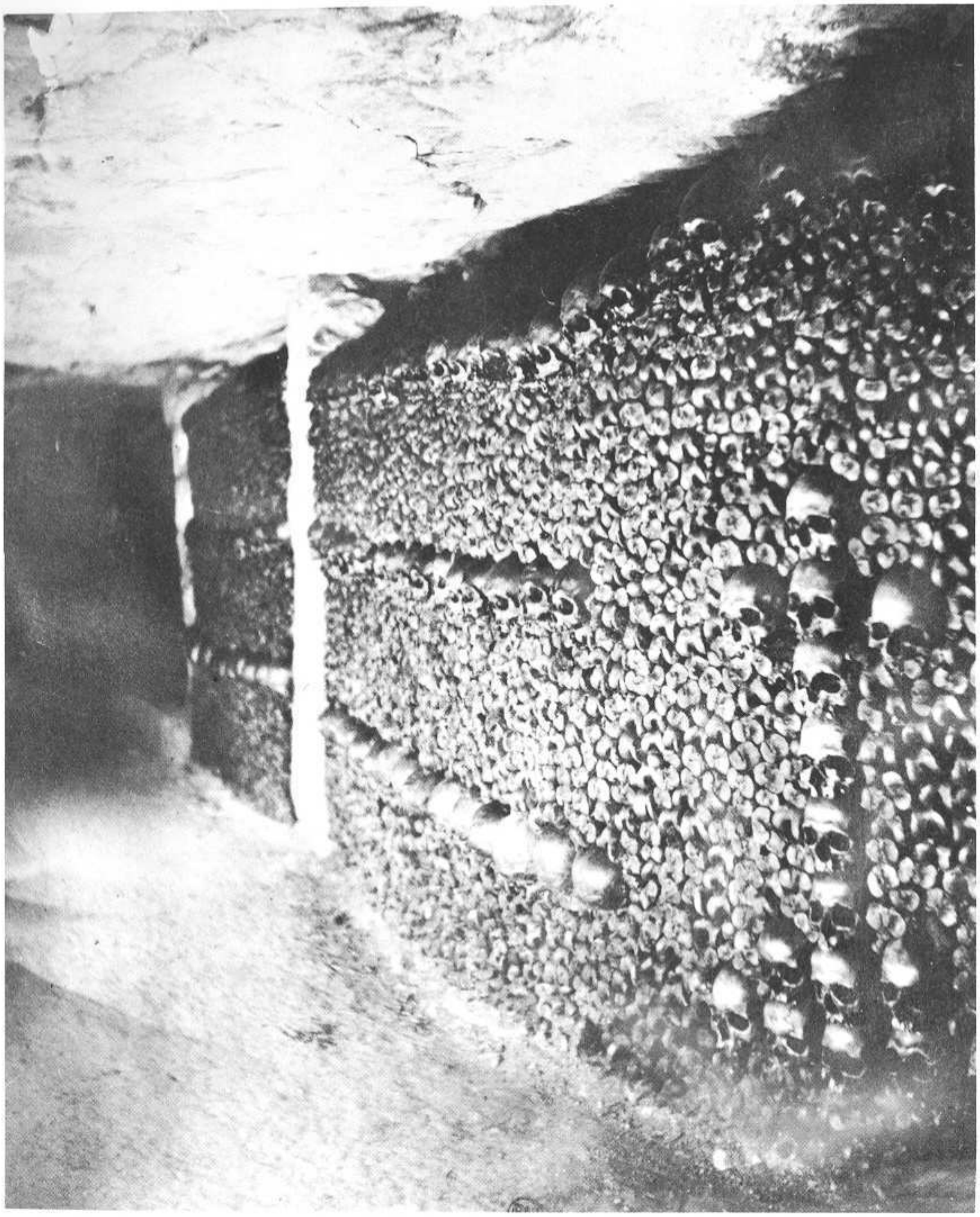
Tina Modotti, *Number 28: Marionette,* n.d.
Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously.



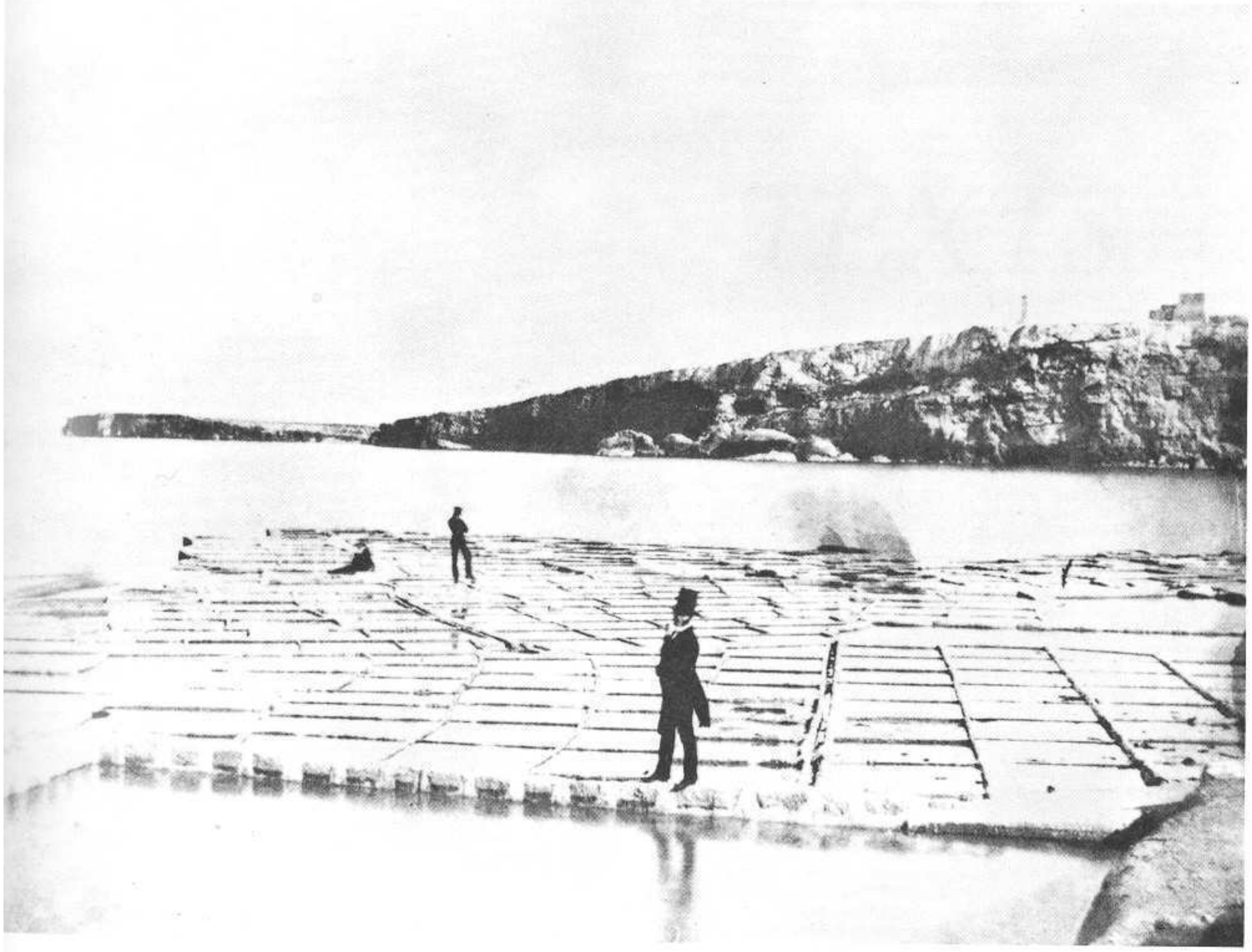
Laura Gilpin, *Steps of Ve Castillo, Chichen Itza*, 1932.
Collection, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.



Edward Weston, *Eroded Plank from Barley Sifter*, 1931.
Collection, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.



Nadar, *The Paris Catacombs*, 1861.
Collection, Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques et des Sites.



Salt Beds, probably at Malta, 1846.
Formerly attributed to W.H. Fox-Talbot, probably George Bridges.
Collection, Royal Photographic Society, Great Britain.

TEXTS

A specter is haunting the cinema: the specter of narrative. If that apparition is an Angel, we must embrace it; and if it is a Devil, then we must cast it out. But we cannot know what it is until we have met it face to face. To that end, then, I offer the pious:

A PENTAGRAM FOR CONJURING THE NARRATIVE

I

LATELY, a friend has complained to me that his sleep is troubled by a recurrent nightmare, in which he lives through two entire lifetimes.

In the first, he is born a brilliant and beautiful heiress to an immense fortune. Her loving and eccentric father arranges that his daughter's birth shall be filmed, together with her every conscious moment thereafter, in color and sound. Eventually he leaves in trust a capital sum, the income from which guarantees that the record shall continue, during all her waking hours, for the rest of her life. Her own inheritance is made contingent upon agreement to this invasion of privacy, to which she is, in any case, accustomed from earliest infancy.

As a woman, my friend lives a long, active and passionate life. She travels the world, and even visits the moon, where, due to a miscalculation, she gives birth to a normal female baby inside a lunar landing capsule. She marries, amid scores of erotic adventures, no fewer than three men: an Olympic decathlon medalist, a radio-astronomer, and, finally, the cameraman of the crew that follows her everywhere.

At twenty-eight, she is named a Nobel laureate for her pioneering research on the optical cortex of the mammalian brain; on her forty-sixth birthday, she is awarded a special joint citation by the Congress of the United States and the Central Committee of the Peoples' Republic of China, in recognition of her difficult role in mediating a treaty regulating the mineral exploitation of Antarctica. In her sixty-seventh year, she declines, on the advice of her lawyers, a mysterious offer from the decrepit Panchen Lama, whom she once met, as a very young woman, at a dinner given in honor of the Papal Nuncio by the Governor of Tennessee. In short, she so crowds her days with experience of every kind that she never once pauses to view the films of her own expanding past.

In extreme old age – having survived all her own children – she makes a will, leaving her fortune to the first child to be born, following the instant of her own death, in the same city ... on the single condition that such child shall spend its whole life watching the accumulated films of her own. Shortly, thereafter, she dies, quietly, in her sleep.

In his dream, my friend experiences her death; and then, after a brief intermission, he discovers, to his outraged astonishment, that he is about to be reincarnated as her heir.

He emerges from the womb to confront the filmed image of *her* birth. He receives a thorough but quaintly obsolete education from the films of *her* school days. As a chubby, asthmatic little boy, he learns (without ever leaving his chair) to dance, sit a horse, and play the viola. During his adolescence, wealthy young men fumble through the confusion of *her* clothing to caress his own unimaginable breasts.

By the time he reaches maturity, he is totally sedentary and reclusive, monstrously obese (from subsisting on an exclusive diet of buttered popcorn), decidedly homosexual by inclination (though masturbation is his only activity), hyperopic, pallid. He no longer speaks, except to shout "FOCUS!"

In middle age, his health begins to fail, and with it, imperceptibly, the memory of his previous life, so that he grows increasingly dependent upon the films to know what to do next. Eventually, his entire inheritance goes to keep him barely alive: for decades he receives an incessant trickle of intravenous medication, as the projector behind him turns and turns.

Finally, he has watched the last reel of film. That same night, after the show, he dies, quietly, in his sleep, unaware that he has completed his task ... whereupon my friend wakens abruptly, to discover himself alive, at home, in his own bed.

II

Whatever is inevitable, however arbitrary its origins, acquires through custom something like gravitational mass, and gathers about itself a resonant nimbus of metaphoric energy.

I can recall, from my childhood, a seeming infinitude of Japanese landscape photographs that included, inevitably, the image of Mount Fujiyama. Naively, I attributed this to native reverence for the holy mountain. The rare or imaginary exception ached mysteriously, in the distant planes of its illusion, for the absent mass – as if a great truncated cone of displaced air could somehow refract the energy of consciousness, as surely as solid rock reflected more visible light.

Later on, I came to understand that Fujiyama is visible from absolutely every place in Japan, and that it looms from every direction at once. In that distant country, every single act of perception must include (must indeed be fused inextricably with) its proper coeval segment of an enterprise of the mind incomparably vast and continuous: the contemplation of the inevitable Mountain.

A stable pattern of energy had once locked granite and ice into a shape immutable beyond human recollection or surmise; that same pattern formed, over long ages, the very physical minds of its beholders, as magnetic forces trace in steel dust the outline of a rose. So that, eventually, all things were to be construed according to the number of qualities they could be seen to share with Fujiyama, the supreme metaphor.

Naturally enough, the Japanese themselves have known about this for centuries. Hokusai, in a magnificent inventory of the mind's ways of knowing through the eye, displays the whole compound of terror and humor: I refer to the "Hundred Views."

III

Euclid is speaking: "Given a straight line, and a point exterior to that line, only one line may be drawn through the point that is parallel to the line." The West listens, nodding torpid assent: the proposition requires no proof. It is axiomatic, self-evident.

It is not.

The famous Postulate rests upon two unstated assumptions concerning the plane upon which the geometer draws: that it is infinite in extent; and that it is flat. Concerning the behavior of those redoubtable fictions, the point and the line, in spaces that are curved, or bounded, Riemann and Lobachevsky have other tales to tell.

Thought seeks inevitable limits – irreducibly stable patterns of energy – knowing that it prospers best within axiomatic perimeters that need never be patrolled or repaired.

I am told that, in 1927, a Louisiana lawmaker (haunted by the ghost of Pythagoras, no doubt) introduced into the legislature of that state a bill that would have made the value of *pi* equal to precisely three. No actual circle could pass unscathed through that equation. The Emperor Shih Huang Ti attempted an axiomatic decree of similar instability: his Great Wall, subject to entropy, never kept out an invader. Instead, the language and culture of China, an energy-pattern of appalling stability, simply engulfed one conqueror after another. Everyone who ventured South of the Wall became, in time, Chinese.

Marcel Duchamp is speaking: "Given: 1. the waterfall; 2. the illuminating gas." (Who listens and understands?)

A waterfall is not a 'thing,' nor is a flame of burning gas. Both are, rather, stable patterns of energy determining the boundaries of a characteristic sensible 'shape' in space and time. The waterfall is present to consciousness only so long as water flows through it, and the flame, only so long as the gas continues to burn. The water may be fresh or salt, full of fish, colored with blood; the gas, acetylene or the vapor of brandy.

You and I are semistable patterns of energy, maintaining in the very teeth of entropy a characteristic shape in space and time. I am a flame through which will eventually pass, according to Buckminster Fuller, thirty-seven tons of vegetables ... among other things. Curiously enough, then, I continue to resemble myself (for the moment at least). Thus reassured, I will try to ask a question.

What are the irreducible axioms of that part of thought we call the art of film?

In other words, what stable patterns of energy limit the 'shapes' generated, in space and in time, by all the celluloid that has ever cascaded through the projector's gate? Rigor demands that we admit only characteristics that are 'totally redundant,' that are to be found in all films.

Two such inevitable conditions of film art come immediately to mind. The first is the visible limit of the projected image itself – *the frame* – which has taken on, through the accumulation of illusions that have transpired within its rectangular boundary, the force of a metaphor for consciousness. The frame, dimensionless as a figure in Euclid's *Elements*, partitions what is present to contemplation from what is absolutely elsewhere.

The second inevitable condition of film art is the plausibility of the photographic illusion. I do not refer to what is called representation, since the photographic record proves to be, on examination, an extreme abstraction from its pretext, arbitrarily mapping values from a long sensory spectrum on a nominal surface. I mean simply that the mind, by a kind of automatic reflex, invariably triangulates a precise distance between the image it sees projected and a 'norm' held in the imagination. (This process depends from an ontogenetic assumption peculiar to photographic images, namely that every photograph implies a 'real' concrete phenomenon (and *vice-versa*!); since it is instantaneous and effortless, it must be 'learned.')

Recently, in conversation, Stan Brakhage (putting on, if you insist, the mask of an *advocatus diaboli*) proposed for film a third axiom, or inevitable condition: narrative.

> *BRAKHAGE'S THEOREM: For any finite series of shots* ['film'] *whatsoever there exists in real time a rational narrative, such that every term in the series, together with its position, duration, partition and reference, shall be perfectly and entirely accounted for.*

(An example: consider for a moment the equation

$$p = 30$$

which may be expanded to yield

$$p = \frac{p}{3} + \frac{p}{5} + \frac{p}{6} + \frac{p}{10} + 6$$

Here is a rational narrative that accounts for the expansion: "A necklace was broken during an amorous struggle. One-third of the pearls fell to the ground, one-fifth stayed on the couch, one-sixth was found by the girl, and one-tenth recovered by her lover: six pearls remained on the string. Say of how many pearls the necklace was composed." Such was the algebra of the ancient Hindus.)

An alogrithm derived from Brakhage's Theorem has already been tested on a number of difficult cases, including Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer,* Conrad's *The Flicker,* and the films of Jordan Belson. All have responded. At this writing, narrative appears to be axiomatically inevitable.

"Whatever is inevitable, however arbitrary its origins, acquires through custom something like gravitational mass...."

It is precisely universal gravitation that makes the skills of the acrobat or aerialist both possible and meaningful. The levitation of our dreams confirms the gravity of our wakefulness.

IV

Samuel Beckett gives us *Malone,* a fiction with whom, (as we Facts must finally admit) we share at least one humiliating trait: we are all waiting to die. Malone waits, literally alone, comfortably supine but immobile, in a small room. How he came to be there, together with some odd bits of rubbish (a boot, for instance, and the cap of a bicycle bell) is uncertain. We are not many pages into his company before we recognize our meeting-place: it is intolerably familiar.

"I" is the English familiar name by which an unspeakably intricate network of colloidal circuits – or, as some reason, the garrulous temporary inhabitat of that nexus – addresses itself; occasionally, etiquette permitting, it even calls itself that in public. It lies, comfortable but immobile, in a hemiellipsoidal chamber of tensile bone. How it came to be there (together with some odd bits of phantasmal rubbish) is a subject for virtually endless speculation: it is certainly alone; and in time it convinces itself, somewhat reluctantly, that it is waiting to die.

The wait turns out to be long, long. The presence, in its domed chamber, masters after a while a round of housekeeping and bookkeeping duties. Then it attempts to look outside. Glimpses are confusing: the sensorium reports a fractured terrain whose hurtling bits seldom coalesce, 'make sense,' as pregnant idiom has it – and the sense they make is itself fugitive, and randomly dispersed throughout an unguessable volume of nothing in particular. What is to be done?

Beckett lets us overhear Malone promising himself to pass the time by telling himself stories. Then Malone proceeds to digress, with a fecundity that is clearly circumscribed only by the finite size of the book; we realize that we are being made privy to nothing less (or more) than the final cadence of a larger digression that extends, by extrapolation, back to the primal integer of Malone's consciousness.

And that integer is halved by an inevitable convention of storytelling: whatever is said implies not only a speaker, but also a listener. The fiction we call Malone divides, like an ovum fertilized by our attention, into two such complementary partners.

The speaker, a paragon of loquacity who calls himself "I," uses every rhetorical trick in the book to engage his listener's attention, even going so far as to ignore him; only rarely does he let slip his suspicion that he may be only a figment of the listener's imagination.

The listener, contrariwise, is a model of taciturnity, invincibly unnameable and invisible, whose presence is felt only in the numbing quietude we normally expect of any discerning auditor forced to listen to a long-winded joke in poor taste ... or of a reader who passes the time by skimming, for his own perverse reasons, the sort of confessional literature that remorselessly asserts its own authenticity in flat declarative sentences.

On the subject of who might be inventing whom, the listener maintains at all times a hissing silence, as of an open telephone line.

Listen, now: what you have just read is no invention of my own.

But I must prefer it to any matrix I myself might choose to generate (from more cheerful assumptions) in the hope of defining the predicament of consciousness, because it locates the genesis of storytelling among the animal necessities of the spirit. Whereas received opinion seems always to represent the story-teller as insinuating his views into the mind of another party, preferably for commercial purposes.

V

> One cannot escape the feeling that these mathematical formulae have an independent existence and an intelligence of their own, that they are wiser than we are, wiser even

> than their discoverers, that we get more out of them than was originally put into them.
>
> —Heinrich Hertz

One fine morning, I awoke to discover that, during the night, I had learned to understand the language of birds. I have listened to them ever since. They say: 'Look at me!' or: 'Get out of here!' or: 'Let's fuck!' or: 'Help!' or: 'Hurrah!' or: 'I found a worm!' and that's *all* they say. And that, when you boil it down, is about all we say.

(Which of those things am I saying now?)

Joseph Conrad insisted that any man's biography could be reduced to a series of three terms: "He was born. He suffered. He died." It is the middle term that interests us here. Let us call it "X". Here are four different expansions of that terms, or true accounts of the suffering of X, by as many story-tellers.

Gertrude Stein: $x = x$

Rudyard Kipling: $x = \dfrac{c-b}{a}$

Ambrose Bierce: $x = \sqrt[3]{\dfrac{2c(c-b)}{a^2}}$

Henry James: $x = \dfrac{2c(c^2-2bc+2b^2)}{c^3-3bc^2+3b^2c-b^3}$

Any schoolboy algebraist will readily see that all four are but variations upon the same hackneyed plot:

$$ax + b = c$$

which may also be solved for the viewpoint of any of its other main character, thus:

$$a = \frac{c-b}{x} \quad \text{or,} \quad b = c-ax \quad \text{or,} \quad c = ax + b$$

or for that of the Supreme Unity:

$$1 = \left(\frac{c-b}{a}\right) -x$$

Manipulation will even yield us the unbiased spectator:

$$0 = \frac{c-b}{ax}$$

All right. Any discerning reader will be finding this a longwinded, pointless joke in poor taste. The algebraic equation

$$ax + b = c$$

is our name for a stable pattern of energy through which an infinity of numerical tetrads may pass. A story is a stable pattern of energy through which an infinity of personages may pass, ourselves included.

The energy-patterns we call physical laws are named after their discoverers: Avogadro, Boyle, Snell. The energy-patterns we call stories are named after their protagonists: Faust, Jesus, Philoktetes. Certain stories seem related to one another, as though the same general equation had been solved for successive roots. We might call such a general equation a myth.

But instead, let us imagine every myth as a crystalline regular polyhedron, suspended, weightless, in a void, with each of its vertices touching, in perfect geodesic equilibrium, the surface of an iridescent imaginary sphere. The existence of the whole body is utterly dependent upon the integrity of all its facets: every facet represents a story.

Near the ecliptic of our universe we find, for example, the mythic Polyhedron of the Father and the Son: on it, the stories of Odysseus and Hamlet occupy adjacent facets, since they are really the same story, told in the former instance from the point of view of the father, and in the latter, from that of the son. Nearly opposite these two, on the dark side, the stories of Oedipus and Agememnon are nearly contiguous.

The center of the cosmos is occupied by the Polyhedron of the Story-Teller. Here we find, imaged upon various facets, the stories of Malone, waiting to die; of Scheherezade, waiting to be killed; of the *Decameron*, whose narrators wait for others to die; of the *Canterbury Tales*, told to ease a passage through space as well as time.

The universe is but sparsely populated by these Polyhedra, enormous though they are. Here and there, a faint nebula marks, perhaps, the region where a new myth struggles to cohere; elsewhere, dark cinders barely glow, remnants of experience lost forever to consciousness. A hole torn in the very fabric of space, whence no energy escapes, is rumored to mark the place where AGNOTON, the black Polyhedron of the Unknowable, vanished.

Nor do all the facets bear images. Some are dusty, some cracked; some are filled with senseless images of insects, or else with a vague, churning scarlet, shot with sparks. Some are as transparent as gin. Some are bright as mirrors and reflect our own faces … and then our eyes … and behind our eyes, distantly, our polyhedral thoughts, glinting, wheeling like galaxies.

EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE: FRAGMENTS OF A TESSERACT

"It is the artist who is truthful and it is photography which lies, for in reality time does not stop."

—Auguste Rodin, 1911

HERE IS AN irksome paradox of public consciousness: to be accorded the status of a legend is to be whittled down to a microscopic point, a nonentity at the intersection of a random handful of idiosyncrasies, tidbits of gossip, shreds of advertising copy.

To the nonspecialist, René Descartes was the philosopher of a single motto (just three little words ... and in Latin, no less). He didn't like to get out of bed in the morning (rhymes with Belacqua, Oblomov, Beckett). His taste in eggs was, to put it mildly, revolting. That Descartes presides over a truly exquisite adventure of the mind, the marriage of geometry with algebra, is mere impedimenta for scholars to attend to.

Beatrix Potter, a savante of mycology whose theories of symbiosis have recently found vindication, is known to some of us, at least, as the authoress of *Peter Rabbit*, illustrated; ignorant of her circumstances, we miss the satire in the little books.

The Reverend C.L. Dodgson, a crucial figure in the development of mathematical logic, inventor of a device for recording dreams, photographic portraitist of Victorian celebrities and young girls, is survived in public memory by his literary persona, Lewis Carroll.

And of the extraordinary man who chose to call himself Eadweard Muybridge, we learn in school only that he was hired as a technician, by a California nabob, to settle a colossal wager over whether a galloping horse, at any instant in its stride, has all four feet off the ground.

The story is almost certainly a fabrication: Leland Stanford was keen enough on horseflesh, and took a vast interest in the 'scientific training' of trotters, but he was neither essentially frivolous nor a gambler. Nor could the single incident explain the ensuing decade of personal friendship between Stanford and Muybridge, during which Stanford gave his full support to projects having precious little to do with horses, opening to the photographer the engineering facilities of the Central Pacific Railroad, and even providing legal defense when Muybridge stood trial for his life.

Eadweard Muybridge was forty-two years old when the association began, with the first 'inconclusive' photographs of the champion trotter Occident, so we can hardly assume that he sprang, fully armed, from the brow of his personal Maecenas. How, then, are we to account for his extending the commission into a lifework? The eleven folio volumes of *Animal Locomotion*, comprising many hundreds of photographic sequences, show men, women, children, domestic and wild animals and birds – and even amputees, and persons suffering from nervous disorders – engaged in hundreds of different activities: they constitute a unique monument that is clearly the work of a man obsessed. And his zoopraxiscope, a machine for resynthesizing the illusion of motion from the analytic images provided by his batteries of sequential still cameras, established Muybridge as the inventor of the photographic cinema.

Four generations of artists, of the most diverse persuasions, have acknowledged the fascination of his work, and it is obvious that many have learned from it, if only at second or third hand: that alone justifies our curiosity about the genesis of his sensibility.

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Enter Edward James Muggeridge, on April 9, 1830. He is supposed to have received a good education. Local tradition held Kingston to have been an ancient seat of Saxon royalty. In 1850, the Coronation Stone (I'm told that half the towns in England boast one) was set up in the Market Square, upon a hexagonal plinth engraved with the names of the kings crowned there. Two of the six were Eadweard the Elder (900 A.D.) and Eadweard the Martyr (975 A.D.). Muggeridge, an East Anglian version of Mod-Rydd, an Old Norse name with magical associations, was less pliable. But a *muy* had once been a dry measure of grain; the elder Muggeridge, who died when the boy was thirteen, had been a cornchandler. Exit then, at about the age of twenty, Eadweard Muybridge, young Romantic, already considered an eccentric. (Thousands of miles away, and twenty-five years later, a man who had been his intimate friend was to tell a jury, in support of a plea of insanity: "I have known Muybridge to sit up all night reading, generally some classical work.")

His destination was California, a simply fabulous land, like Szechuan or the West of England, where gold, shipping, and the whalefish had kept some men rich enough long enough to make them hungry for culture. He set up shop as a genial bookseller in San Francisco, got to know the bohemian crowd, and prospered by outfitting the local gentry with entire libraries.

In 1860 he returned to England, convalescent from a serious stagecoach accident, for a visit that lasted nearly seven years; while he was there, he learned the cumbersome, delicate craft of the collodion wet-plate, and discovered his vocation as a photographer. When he returned to California, it was to work under the pseudonym "Helios," affecting the broad-brimmed hat and velvet cape of continental poets and painters, and calling himself a "photographic artist."

During the next five years, he systematically photographed the Far West, producing some 2,000 images in several series catalogued by Bradley & Rulofson, a photographic gallery that distributed his work: these series included views of San Francisco, lighthouses of the Pacific Coast, Vancouver Island, Alaska (as Director of Photographic Surveys for the United States government), Farallone Island, railroads, Geyser Springs, Woodward's Gardens, Yosemite, Mariposa Grove. "Helios' Flying Studio" offered not only albums of contact prints made from very large plates, but also innumerable slides for the stereopticon that had already become indispensable in every American household.

In fact, it does not seem that Muybridge ever quite stopped making conventional still photographs with the large view camera; material in the Kingston Library includes images made in places as diverse as Alberta, Louisiana and Georgia, Maine, Chicago (at the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893, where he operated his Zoopraxographical Hall among the sideshows on the Midway), and the beaches at Atlantic City (New York holiday crowds romping in the surf, dressed as if for an Arctic blizzard); many were made long after he had completed and published his work in Philadelphia, in the midst of repeated American and European tours with his zoopraxiscope, lecturing on "The Science of Animal Locomotion in its Relation to Design in Art."

Sometime in 1870 or 1871, Muybridge married Flora Shallcross Stone, a women much younger than himself, who had been (gasps from the jury) divorced. The work at Leland Stanford's Palo Alto farm began in the spring of 1872; the earliest instantaneous photographs of horses, exposed with a high-speed shutter Muybridge built from a cigar box, have been lost, along with those made the following year under improved conditions. The work was at first only sporadically pursued, with crude equipment. Muybridge pronounced himself dissatisfied with the results, which nonetheless attracted a good deal of attention as curiosities and augmented his considerable international reputation. In 1873, he photographed the progress of the Modoc Indian War, making images of considerable intimacy on both sides of the conflict, apparently acting as a free agent, much as Roger Fenton had done in the Crimea. When he returned home, Flora Muybridge presented him with a baby boy that she had conceived in his absence by one Harry Larkyns, ne'er-do-well. On October 17, 1874, Muybridge traveled by boat and wagon to Calistoga, where Larkyns was staying, and killed his wife's lover with a single pistol shot. After a sensational trial, the jury found the homicide justifiable. During four months of imprisonment, Muybridge's hair and beard had turned entirely white.

He left immediately for a year-long photographic expedition in Central America. While he was gone, Flora sued him for divorce on grounds of extreme cruelty (in support of which she deposed only that Muybridge had looked through their bedroom window, seen her sleeping, and then left; the case was dismissed, and we are left to imagine the ferocity of the man's stare). Shortly thereafter, she died. Returning to California, Muybridge issued an immense portfolio of photographs from Panama, Guatemala, and Mexico, including a study of the cultivation of coffee.

1877 brought his last major work in still photography proper: an immense 360-degree panorama of San Francisco, in thirteen panels taken from the roof of the Mark Hopkins house on Nob Hill. He had already resumed his studies of locomotion, at Palo Alto, and this time it was in absolute earnest. He was forty-seven years old.

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Had Muybridge left us none of his celebrated sequences, his place as an innovative master in the history of photographic art would nevertheless be assured. The huge body of work from his years of greatest creative expansion, the decade 1867-77, sustains from the very outset, with almost voluptuous intensity, a markedly personal vision. Among early photographers of the American West, there is scarcely anyone (with the possible exception of Timothy O'Sullivan) to put alongside him: he is the Grand Progenitor of a West Coast school of view camera photography that has included Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Wynn Bullock, and others in our own time. He was, moreover, an indefatigable stereoscopist; his stereo images, committing him by definition to the most thoroughgoing photographic illusionism this side of full color, function as a curious palimpsest to the mature sequences, from which very many of the illusionist strategies available to photography have been rigorously evacuated.

In his advertising cards for Pacific Rolling Mills, and for Bradley & Rulofson (neither are isolated instances), he seems to anticipate much later developments elsewhere in the visual arts. 'Studies' of trees and clouds (the latter emphatically including the sun) predate by fifty and eighty years respectively the tree photographs of Atget and Alfred Stieglitz' late work, the Equivalents.

If any other photographer in the 19th century foreshadows the 20th as massively, that man must be Oscar Gustav Rejlander (1813-1875); and it is curious that Muybridge's method for making the serial photographs has a practical elaboration of a theoretical scheme published by Rejlander. One wonders whether Muybridge ever met the man who began with *The Two Ways of Life* and ended as Charles Darwin's illustrator, making *The Artist's Dream* along the way.

But what interests me most, in all this work of Muybridge's first career, is something that seems to anticipate, almost subliminally, the sequences of *Animal Locomotion* ... a preoccupation that is restless, never quite consistently present, seldom sharply focused: I refer to Muybridge's apparent absorption in problems that have to do with what we call time.

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Philosophical questions about the nature of time, originating in the ascendancy of Newtonian mechanics, variously energized and vexed much of 19th-century thought. Einstein's relativistic mechanics eventually established that time is simply a function of the observer's frame of reference; 20th-century cinema discovered, quite early on, that temporality is precisely as plastic as the filmic substance itself. It is remarkable that cinema depends from a philosophical fiction that we have from the paradoxes of Zeno, and that informs the infinitesimal calculus of Newton: namely, that it is possible to view the indivisible flow of time as if it were composed of an infinite succession of discrete and perfectly static instants.

But, during the long interval that concerns us, the question brought forth a profusion of views, each of which met its scientific apology and its specific implementation in art. The heathen opinion had been that time was some sort of personifiable substance, *Chronos*, a corrosive universal solvent into which all things were dumped at the moment of their creation, and then slowly sank, suffering gradual attrition. From some such simile, speculations proliferated. Time was duration, or was rate of change, or it was the sum of all conceivable rates. It was seen, always, as linear and isotropic. Time, it was said, passed ... which looks, nowadays, like an excessively euphemistic way of saying that we pass.

Art historians invented a variation, 'influence,' in which the fluid metaphor becomes a hydraulic system for transmitting energy: The frog Virgil, jumping into the old pond, makes waves whose widening rings eventually joggle the cork Tennyson. The flow is still seen as unidirectional. T.S. Eliot's crucial insight, that the temporal system of a tradition permits, and even requires, movement of energy in all directions, could not have taken place within the metaphoric continuum of 'classical' temporality.

The underlying assumption was that time 'exists,' just as fictions like ether and phlogiston were once supposed to exist, on a basis of parity with the paper on which these words are printed. Whereas a conjectural summary of our own view might read: 'Time' is our name for an irreducible condition of our perception of phenomena; therefore, statements which would separate the notion of time from some object of direct perception, are meaningless.

Much of the early history of still photography may be looked upon as the struggle of the art to purge itself of temporality. The normative still photograph, the snapshot, purports to be an ideal, infinitely thin, wholly static cross section through a four-dimensional solid, or tesseract, of unimaginable intricacy. W.H. Fox Talbot, inventor of photography and also a mathematician who was certainly acquainted with the incremental model of time, writes of his longing to "capture ... creatures of a single instant": the creatures in question are landscape images projected on the groundglass of his camera obscura. He would escape time, and fix his instantaneous pictures, immutable and incorruptible, outside the influence of entropy, the destroyer. But it was not long before still photographers began toying with the temporal: the first known narrative sequence (illustrating the Lord's Prayer) dates to 1841, and that opened the field to the likes of *Little Red Riding Hood* (high seriousness in four panels, by Henry Peach Robinson, originator of new sins). That even the single image, in epitomizing an entire narrative, may thereby imply a temporality, was knowledge learned from the still photograph, of which the Surrealists were to make much.

The work of Étienne-Jules Marey, a scientist who switched from graphic to photographic notations of animal movement under Muybridge's direct tutelage, summarizes the point of disjunction between the still photograph and cinema; his studies consist of serial exposures made on a single plate. The photograph could no longer contain the contradictory pressures to affirm time and to deny it. It split sharply into an illustionistic cinema of incessant motion and a static photographic art that remained frozen solid for decades. So complete and immediate was the separation that by 1917 the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn (an ex-painter, who is rumored to have collaborated on a Vorticist film, long since lost, with Ezra Pound) could speculate in print – and in ignorance – on the "interesting patterns" that might be produced if one were but to do what Marey had in fact done, mountainously, thirty-odd years before.

On first inspection, Muybridge's early work seems to affirm the antitemporality of the still photography as he had inherited it. He may have meant to do so; an imperfection of his material ran counter to such intentions. The collodion plate was slow, exposures long, the image of anything moving blurred. Yet Muybridge, in some of his earliest landscape work, seems positively to seek, of all things, waterfalls; long exposures of which produce images of a strange, ghostly substance that is in fact the tesseract of water: what is to be seen is not water itself, but the virtual volume it occupies during the whole time-interval of the exposure. It is certain that Muybridge was not the first photographer to make such pictures; my point is that he seems to have been the first to accept the 'error,' and then systematically, to cherish it.

In the photographs concerned with Point Bonita Lighthouse, there is a kind of randomization, or reshuffling, of the sequence of approach to the lighthouse, seen from several different viewpoints, in space, which destroys the linearity of an implied molecule of narrative time, reducing the experience to a jagged simultaneity that was to be more fully explored in film montage fifty years later.

Generically allied to this series is the tactic adopted in an advertising photograph made for Bradley & Rulofson (and their center-ring attraction, Muybridge himself). The resemblance to later collage and accumulation pieces long familiar to us is striking (the year is 1873), but it is, I think, superficial. Because the elements of the image are themselves illusionistic fragments of photographs, of varying implied depth, the space is propelled backward and forward on an inchmeal basis as we contemplate the contents of the frame; only the edges of the individual elements, and the graphic lines of type which make us conscious of seeing marks on a surface, tend to compress the image into the shallow inferential space proper to Cubism. But the arrangement of photographs within the image is deliberate, and what we do infer is the sequence in which the pieces of this still life were laid down: in compounding a paradoxical illusionist space, Muybridge has also generated a 'shallow' inferential temporality.

Muybridge continued this same investigation in at least one other work: the title page for the Central American album issued in 1875, the largest number of images from which remain breathlessly immobile. But in one subset (the photographs are in Kingston) of a hunting party in Panama, Muybridge transgresses against one of the great commandments of view camera photography, permitting what was at that time the most violent smearing and blurring of moving figures (again, he acknowledged the images, and assumed responsibility for them, by allowing them to be publicly distributed); the jungle background against which they are seen is rendered with canonical sharpness.

Finally, in the great San Francisco panorama of 1877, he condenses an entire rotation of the seeing eye around the horizon (an action that must take place in time) into a simultaneity that is at once completely plausible and perfectly impossible; it is as if a work of sculpture were to be seen turned inside out, by some prodigy of topology.

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Muybridge returned, then, to Palo Alto and his sequences. The new attempts were immediately successful, and the work continued, for nearly two decades, in a delirium of inexorable logic and with little modification, synthesis following analysis; the results, at least in excerpt, are known to everyone who associates anything at all with the name of Eadweard Muybridge.

Having once consciously fastened upon time as his grand subject, Muybridge quickly emptied his images as nearly as he could of everything else. His animals, athletes, and subverted painters' models are nameless and mostly naked, performing their banalities, purged of drama if not of occasional horseplay, before a uniform grid of Cartesian coordinates, a kind of universal 'frame of reference,' ostensibly intended as an aid in reconciling the successive images with chronometry, that also destroys all sense of scale (the figures could be pagan constellations in the sky), and utterly obliterates the tactile particularity that is one of the photograph's paramount traits, thereby annihilating any possible feeling of place. About all that is left, in each case, is an archetypal fragment of living action, potentially subject to the incessant reiteration that is one of the most familiar and intolerable features of our dreams.

Beyond that, there is a little that Muybridge, looking from close up, could not have seen: I am always aware, looking at the sequences, that the bodies of Muybridge's actors are somehow strangely unlike our own, as if slightly obsolescent: The men seem to be heavy-duty models; and all but the stoutest women are round-hipped, with small high breasts that remind me of Cranach's *Judgment of Paris*. Their postures, gestures, gaits are not quite ours either, and seem to mean something a little different.[1] The children, birds, dogs, haven't changed much. The horse is notable chiefly for appearing with what at first seems uncalled-for-frequency – until one recalls that there was once a time (geologically remote in feeling from own) when the horse represented very much more than the rather mannered recreation we know today.

And it was over Muybridge's photographs of the horse, of all things, that a great storm of controversy broke in his own time. Painters, it seems, were absorbed in rendering, with perfect verisimilitude … the horse! Emotions ran high, and so forth, and so on. I have neither space nor inclination to pursue the argument here. Paul Valéry, in the midst of a discussion of Dégas, gets to the heart of what was serious in the matter; I reproduce his discussion as definitive:

> Muybridge's photographs laid bare all the mistakes that sculptors and painters had made in their renderings of the various postures of the horse. They showed how inventive the eye is, or rather how much the sight elaborates on the data it gives us as the positive and impersonal result of observation. Between the state of vision as mere *patches of color* and as *things* or *objects*, a whole series of mysterious operations takes place, reducing to order as best it can the incoherence of raw perceptions, resolving contradictions, bringing to bear judgements formed since early infancy, imposing continuity, connection, and the systems of change which we group under the labels of *space, time, matter*, and *movement*. This was why the horse was imagined to move in the way the eye seemed to see it; and it might be that, if these old-style representations were examined with sufficient subtlety, the *law* of unconscious falsification might be discovered by which it seemed possible to picture the positions of a bird in flight, or a horse galloping, as if they could be studied in leisure; but these interpolated pauses are imaginary. Only *probable* positions could be assigned to movement so rapid, and it might be worthwhile to try to define, by means of documentary comparison, this kind of creative seeing by which the understanding filled the gaps in sense perception.[2]

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A question remains to haunt, and I will offer a bare intuition of my own by way of attempted answer.

Quite simply, what occasioned Muybridge's obsession? What need drove him, beyond a reasonable limit of dozens or even hundreds of sequences, to make them by thousands? For the 'demonstration,' if such a thing was intended, must have been quite adequate by the time he left California. Instead, with Thomas Eakins' help, he went to Pennsylvania and pursued it into encyclopaedic enormity.

I will simply invert Rodin's remark (he was, in fact, speaking of Muybridge's work) to read thus: "It is the photograph which is truthful, and the artist who lies, for in reality time *does* stop." Time seems, sometimes, to stop, to be suspended in tableaux disjunct from change and flux. Most human beings experience, at one time or another, moments of intense passion during which perception seems vividly arrested: erotic rapture, or the extremes of rage and terror came to mind. Eadweard Muybridge may be certified as having experienced at least one such moment of extraordinary passion. I refer, of course, to the act of committing murder. I submit that that brief and banal action, outside time, was the theme upon which he was forced to devise variations in such numbers that he finally exhausted, for himself, its significance. To bring back to equilibrium the energy generated in that instant required the work of half a lifetime. So that we might add, in our imagination, just one more sequence to Muybridge's multitude, and call it: *Man raising a pistol and firing*.

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When the work was done, Muybridge retired to Kingston-on-Thames. Withdrawing from all contention, he serenely took up the British national pastime of gardening. The old man imported sago palms and a ginkgo tree from California, and planted them in his backyard. I am told that they still thrive. When he died, in 1904, he was constructing a little pond, in the shape of the Great Lakes of North America.

I am tempted to call it a perfect life.

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The steps a man takes, from the day of his birth of the day of his death, trace an inconceivable figure in time. The Divine Intelligence perceives that figure at once, as man's intelligence perceives a triangle. That figure, perhaps, has its determined function in the economy of the universe.

—Jorge Luis Borges
The Mirror of the Enigmas

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1. It seems quite appropriate that Ray Birdwhistell should be pursuing his studies of kinesics at the same university where ninety years before, Muybridge had stared the vocabulary of body language into such voluminous existence, whether or not he understood anything of its syntax.
2. Paul Valery, "Degas, Manet, and Morisot," *Collected Works*, vol. 12, trans. D. Paul, New York, 1960, p. 41.

FILM IN THE HOUSE OF THE WORD

IN 1928, Sergei Eisenstein published a brief manifesto on film sound that has met with no direct critique or reply in more than half a century. In his statement, written within an euphoric moment of convergence between theory and practice that gave us *October* and *The General Line*, and suggested to him the grand project of an 'intellectual montage,' Eisenstein began an effort that precipitated in a group of empty centers and their satellite notes and essays: the hypothetical cinematic 'realizations' of three written texts ... *An American Tragedy*, *Ulysses*, and *Capital*. Eisenstein himself, under the extreme pressures of the Stalinist 'restoration,' largely abandoned his research into intellectual montage for extended meditations on synaesthesia, the microstructure of the frame, and the architectonics of film narrative, in a resurrection of the quest for a fusion of the arts; the man who directed a production of *The Valkyrie* in Moscow must have seen, in the musical drama of Wagner, a prefiguration of some of film's boldest ambitions. These ambitions still obtain; that research, advanced by Vertov, has never entirely languished.

"The dream of a sound film has come true.... The whole world is talking about the silent thing that has learned to talk." Eisenstein awakened to the factualization of desire with surprised ambivalence, as if discovering the Silent Thing to have been carved by Pygmalion – for film, perennially associated with music, had never been generically silent. It had been mute, once an apprentice mime in a precinematic (and prelinguistic) theater, now a journeyman aspiring to an intricate mimesis of thought, to whose construction a sound-on-film technology was as vital as cinematography itself.

It was not simply sound, then, that threatened to destroy all the 'present formal achievements' of montage, but the dubious gift of speech, the Prime Instance of language, the linear decoding of the terrain of thought into a stream of utterance. Thus film, from its first word, was to be perceived in a double posture of defilement and fulfillment, and Eisenstein found himself present at a rite of passage; the end of the edenic childhood of montage was accompanied by a wistful vision of 'fading virginity and purity.'

The syndrome of logophobia has been pandemic throughout recent practice in the visual arts. "How many colors are there in a field of grass," Stan Brakhage asks in *Metaphors on Vision,* "for a crawling baby who has never heard of green?" We are prompted to enter into complicity with the author: the word is anaesthetic, truncating the report of an innocent sensorium, depriving thought of that direct Vision of a universe of ideal forms that would pierce, sweep away, the clutter of denatured simulacra created by language – and so the infant, traversing the fulsome excellence of a Garden that somehow exists without the intervention of the Word, must see an infinitude of colors.

Others reason that the crawling baby sees no 'colors' at all, since the notion of color is a complex abstraction, closely bound to language and culture (there are natural languages that make no distinction between 'green' and 'blue') that brackets a neurophysiological response to a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. The field of grass is without form, and void.

During painting's culminating assault on illusion, in the 1950's and '60's, one often heard the epithet 'literary' applied as a pejorative to work that retained vestiges of recognizable (and thereby nameable) pretext sufficient to the identification of an imbedding deep space – although the presence of the word as a graphic sign (in Robert Motherwell's *Je t'aime* paintings, for instance, or Frank

Stella's *Mary Lou* series) was accepted with routine serenity. One heard Barnet Newman admonish Larry Poons when the younger painter had published, as a show poster, a photograph incorporating an assertive pun on his own name; saw Carl Andre in ardent moral outrage at the very mention of Magritte; witnessed the monolithic public silence of the generation of Abstract Expressionists.

The terms of the indictment were clear: language was suspect as the defender of illusion, and both must be purged together, in the interest of a rematerialization of a tradition besieged by the superior illusions of photography. Only the poetics of the title escaped inquisition, for a time. If there is some final genetic bond between language and illusion, then the atavistic persistence of illusion ... fossil traces, upon the painterly surface, of thickets, vistas of torn gauze, spread hides, systems of tinted shadows, receding perspectives of arches ... affirms, at the last, the utter permeance of language.

Now we are not perfectly free to make of language an agonist in a theater of desire which is itself defined by the limits of language. Every artistic dialogue that concludes in a decision to ostracize the word is disingenuous to the degree that it succeeds in concealing from itself its fear of the word ... and the source of that fear: that language, in every culture, and before it may become an arena of discourse, is, above all, an expanding arena of power, claiming for itself and its wielders all that it can seize, and relinquishing nothing. In this regard, Eisenstein is characteristically abrupt, claiming for film, in accord with Lenin's own assessment of the Revolution's priorities, something of the power of language: "At present, the film, working with visual images, has a powerful affect on a person and has rightfully taken one of the first places among the arts."

Film, like all the arts, was to instruct, to move; its considerable privilege derived, ironically, from a double illiteracy: it's diagesis was legible to a mass populace that could not read, and its formal strategies were largely illegible to a burgeoning elite that could. Eisenstein was at some pains to preserve film's claim to political efficacy: in the midst of the short text he paused to offer a gratuitous recantation for the 'formalist' errors of *October*, submitting that the advent of sound will spare the director from resorting to "fanciful montage structures, arousing the fearsome eventuality of meaninglessness and reactionary decadence." Invoking the power of language, he issued preliminary disclaimers for near occasions of sin not yet contemplated; in 1932, in *A Course in Treatment*, he was to write of "wonderful sketches," never to be expanded, for montage structures that anticipate a much later historical moment in film, fanciful enough to normalize the "formalist jackstraws" of *Man With a Movie Camera*.

Sound, we read, will ameliorate film's "imperfect method," improve its thermodynamic efficiency: what brings the menace of speech abolishes writing, and the mode of reading that accompanies it, eliding those discontinuities in an illusionist continuum introduced by the intrusion of the graphic intertitle. Parenthetically, as well, it will restore to equilibrium an imbalance in film's psychological distance from the spectator by obviating "certain inserted close-ups" that have played a merely "explanatory" role, "burdening" montage composition, decreasing its tempo. However, and above all, complete dissynchrony between sound and image is to be maintained (Eisenstein did not, for the moment, insist on more drastic disjunctions), since the permanent "adhesion" of sound to a given image, as of a name to its referent, increases that image's "inertia" and its independence of meaning.

Thus far, we find no single imperative that requires Eisenstein's logophobia. But suddenly (the adverb is peculiarly his own: an intertitle that announces the massacre on the Odessa Steps in *Potemkin*) one may recognize, within the diction of a text that adroitly warns us away from language, a crucial agenda: the preservation of a dim outline of what it is that he is so anxious to protect from language. One may imagine something whose parts are to be denied, and protected from, interdependence and mutual adhesion; it is not to be burdened, nor its inertia increased, nor its tempo retarded; it is to remain portable across cultural boundaries, and its elaboration and development are not to be impeded.

There are only two hypothetical symbolic systems whose formal descriptions meet such requirements. One is a universal natural language; the other is a perfect machine. As one reflects that the two are mutually congruent, one remembers that Eisenstein was at once a gifted linguist, an artist haunted by the claims of language – and also, by training, an engineer. It seems possible to suggest that he glimpsed, however quickly, a project beyond the intellectual montage: the construction of a machine, very much like film, more efficient than language, that might, entering into direct competition with language, transcend its speed, abstraction, compactness, democracy, ambiguity, power … a project, moreover, whose ultimate promise was the constitution of an external critique of language itself. If such a thing were to be, a consequent celestial mechanics of the intellect might picture a body called Language, and a body called Film, in symmetrical orbit about one another, in perpetual and dialectical motion.

It is natural that considerable libidinal energy should be expended to protect such fragile transitions in thought. The ritual gesture that wards off language also preserves language, as well as film, for a later moment of parity, of confrontation.

All of Eisenstein's bleakest predictions came true; the commercial success of the talkies polarized the development of a system of distribution that virtually guaranteed the stagnation of the sound track as an independent and coeval information channel sustaining the growth of a complex montage in consensual simultaneity.

Even if the requirements of Socialist Realism had not supervened, the vicissitude of specialism might well have prevented even Sergei Eisenstein, the director, from attempting the expected "first experimental work" with sound along the lines of "distinct non-synchronization" with images.

Nevertheless, the work goes on, and filmmakers have responded, with increasing rigor, to the urgent contradictions he first expounded. Not through immediate design and cathexis, but by way of an historical process of the exhaustion of its alternatives, the deferred dream of the sound film presents itself to be dreamed again.

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A man condemned to death begged Alexander to pardon him, vowing, given a year's reprieve, that he would teach Bucephalus (who already spoke Bulgarian, Farsi and Greek) to sing. When his friends derided him for a fool who merely postponed the inevitable, he replied: "A year is a long time. The king may die; I may die. Or … who knows! … maybe the horse will learn to sing!"

Buffalo, New York, April 1981

INCISIONS IN HISTORY/ SEGMENTS OF ETERNITY

Time cuts down All,
Both Great and Small.
—The Bay State Primer, c. 1800

Time is not, Time is the evil, beloved
—Ezra Pound, Canto LXXIV

HERE ARE some hand-tinted snapshots of myself talking with a tall young woman at an imaginary party:

Time out of mind I find myself seized, at one and the same moment, by a fit of obstreperousness and a female historian. Reasoning, more from circumstance than tradition, that all men, by their nature, desire to know, I desire of her to know just what history is, anyhow.

"Near as I can make out," she allows, "it's just one god damned thing after another."

I put on a reasonable face. "Come now," I venture, "what about cause and effect?"

"Take your choice," she says.

"Come again?" I choke.

"Cause *or* effect: take your choice. Right now, during the Historical Period, causes seem to be inbreeding among themselves, engendering more of their own kind. Later on, perhaps, when life has fled matter, there may remain some residual effects. But don't worry, it won't happen in our lifetime."

"Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," I quote, clutching vaguely at the sort of aphorism by which astronomy once managed to ally itself with biology.

"Don't be scientific," she replies tartly.

I paw and snort. "Change!" I bellow. "Flux!"

She sniffs. "We historians are divided among ourselves," she recites primly. "Some reason that history began with a Big Bang ... the appearance of mankind ... and interpolate occasional Lesser Bangs thereafter. This school proceeds from solipsism to academic territorialism with no intervening period of maturity. Certain others imagine history to be an oscillatory machine that maintains itself in a Steady State: they leave themselves open to political cynicism, on the one hand, and esthetic inertia on the other."

"But what do you believe?" I ask.

She stiffens. "Listen," she replies, "the trouble with the Universe, seen from a rigorously historical point of view, is just this: no one was there to photograph the beginning of it – and presumably, at the end, no one will bother. After all, history, like pornography, couldn't really begin until photography was invented. Before that, every account of events is merely somebody's panting prose fiction. Have you ever read Herodotus' description of a crocodile? It is the *Fanny Hill* of zoology. Nothing is presented to the senses, and so nothing can enter the mind that wasn't there in the first place."

She pauses to inhale deeply, and continues: "But assuming a beginning and an end to the Universe, all evidence indicates that the whole contraption is winding down like the spring in a cheap movie camera."

"Now I hope you won't think me vulgar," she confides, "but it seems to me that nowadays both the ash-heap and the file of photographs are constantly expanding. I suspect, even, that there is some secret principle of occult balance, of internal agreement, between the two masses of stuff. The photographs are splendidly organized according to date, location, author and subject; the ash-heap is perfectly degenerate. Both are mute, and refuse to illuminate one another. Rather, pictures and rubbish seem to conspire toward mutual maintenance; they even increase, in spite of every human effort. Just between you and me, it won't be long before they gobble up everything else."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" I gasp.

"We might try praying," she suggests.

"Good Lord, are you kidding?" I gag.

"No," she muses, "that particular prayer doesn't sound quite appropriate; it's much too general. I tend to favor The Modernist's Prayer."

"And what might that be?" I beg to know.

"We'll begin with something traditional," she says, "like a Pater Noster, or Now I Lay Me ..., and then add to it the words: And please, God, can't you do something about Entropy?"

That was not the end of our *tableau vivant* ... but the rest of the album seems to be empty. Wait: here is a picture of my former wife and a friend, walking with a dog in the snow ... but you wouldn't be interested in that.

Please remember that these snapshots are, in the first place, only in your mind. After all, I may have told you no more than I want you to know. I may even have forgotten some of the important parts. On the other hand, perhaps I've forgotten all of them.

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Let us pretend that the compound activity of making and experiencing photographs may be examined simply as a form of human behavior. Beginning, during the presidential incumbency of Andrew Jackson, as a novel aberration, it had assumed the proportions of a pandemic when our grandfathers were infants. By now, we recognize that the photographic syndrome is congenital in our culture. While it is most often to be encountered in its chronic phase, acute cases are by no means rare; and occasional individuals exhibit the disorder in a degree that we are obliged to regard as terminal.

So we are entitled to ask, with the neo-Darwinists, what there may be in all this photographic behaviour that is 'adaptive'; that is, in what way does it promote, actively or passively, the survival of the organism and of the species. And, given that it *does* perform such a function, we may also ask how its ways of so doing differ from those of the venerable arts of painting, or of literature.

How, indeed, does any work of art help us to survive?

I admit that my own convictions in the matter are neither complex nor original: I believe that we make art ... and every deliberate human activity known to me seems to aspire, however obliquely, to the estate of art ... as a defense against the humiliating, insistent pathos of our one utter certainty: that we are going to die. Of all animals, we seem alone in our stewardship of this intolerable secret – and alone, as well, in our propensity for making art. William Butler Years is succinct:

Nor dread nor hope attend
A dying animal;
A man awaits his end

Dreading and hoping all;
Many times he died,
Many times rose again.
A great man in his pride
Confronting murderous men
Casts derision upon
Supersession of breath;
He knows death to the bone –
Man has created death.

The ways we have found out to live in equipoise with this 'creation' of ours are, I suspect, encoded upon our very genetic spiral, so that we have no choice in the matter: we do not define our art (although, consciousness interposing the gift of fallibility, we believe we do) but rather it somehow defines us, as hexagonal labyrinths of wax both circumscribe and detail the honeybee.

Toward that cessation of consciousness that is to be our death, as toward a vanishing point in convergent rectilinear space, an instrument within the mind, which we might call conjecture, maintains incessant attention. Along the same axis, the instrument of memory addresses itself to a complementary vanishing point: the incipience of consciousness that first stirred, as some reason, at the instant of our conception. The confused plane of the Absolute Present, where we live, or have just seemed to live, brings to irreconcilable focus these two divergent images of our experience of time.

The impossibility of resolving, simultaneously, two incompatible systems of perspective upon a single plane, may tolerate or favor our perennial uneasiness at living in the moment, as if we were forever being dispossessed from the few certitudes of our own knowledge.

Between birth and death, leaving aside the automatic transactions of metabolism, most animals engage in only one pursuit: the more or less intricate and constant exercise of sexuality ... which I understand to be a remarkably elegant and economical method for assuring the physical species of virtual immortality by offering immediate rewards to the mortal participants.

Between consciousness' uncertain beginning and its equally certain end, man superimposes upon animal sexuality the pursuit of art. Seen as a recent adaptive mutation aimed at assuring mental continuity, through historic time, to a species whose individual experiences constitute a testament to the notion of disjunction, art-making appears, thus far, to be moderately successful ... amazingly economical (as compared with its perverse imitations, like experimental science, or its unsuccessful vulgarizations, like religion) ... although it is of vacillating elegance, and offers uncertain rewards to its participants.

This is not the time for an extended investigation of the ways in which art, or the creation of immaterial mind – and sexuality, or the recreation of carnal substance – interresonate, seeming always about to fuse in a perception that remains, inseparably, immanent in the moment of experience itself. But it is inevitable that every impassioned act or discourse must, somehow, become a part of that investigation, sharing with it an expectation of imminent revelation which is itself both the ubiquitous center and the invisible periphery of all our thought.

For whatever wisdom language holds, I would point out that our verb, to create, and our technical term for the strictly human part of the brain, cerebrum, both derive from the Latin verb *creo,* which means: "I beget." And Aristotle, who excused himself some time ago, says of the gonads and the brain that they bear a functional resemblance to each other, in that both are capable of exteriorizing a form without reference to anything else. He goes on to call *spermatikotatos,* "most spermatic," the optic chiasm, which is that intersection within the physical mind where our two eyes compare notes, before writing home to their respective parents, the twin hemispheres of the brain.

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The trouble with practically everything, seen from a rigorously inquisitive point of view, is just this: no one was there at the beginning to take notes on the proceedings. Cro-Magnon man, for all his obvious charm and cunning, seems not to have had the forethought to bring with him into the world a camera, a tape recorder, or even (delight of scholars!) a Xerox machine. Of the arts, only photography, along with its prodigious sibling, the cinema, has appeared during historic time; and, viewing them from outside, we seem curiously unwilling to trust the discoveries made, in all the arts, on the 'inside,' where their substance and implications are recreated, *ab ovo,* in every really new work.

For whatever wisdom language holds, it is common knowledge among philologists that languages spring as it were full-blown into life, and proceed, as time passes, from complex to simple. The most primitive languages we know are, quite uniformly, the most complicated grammatically. The utopian artifices once put forth as 'universal languages' are a case in point: the oddity called Volapük, a predecessor of Dr. Zamenhof's Esperanto, boasted more cases, tenses, moods than Sanskrit (itself a priestly invention based on Vedic). Sir Thomas Urquhart, Rabelais' first English translator, is said to have brought forth a 'tongue' of even daffier proportions.

So we might reasonably expect to find, in the very first scrawls and babblings of an infant art, a map of its later typical attitudes and preoccupations, and even a concise definition of the art's specific given task, somewhat as we discover, densely folded into a few chromosomes, all the instructions (could we but decipher them) for building a rhinoceros.

In his prefatory essay to the first photographically illustrated book, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) – the title itself is a stew of significations – William Henry Fox Talbot speaks of a vision that had come to him nine years earlier, at Lake Como, where he way trying to make landscape drawings with the aid of a camera lucida:

> This led me to reflect on the inimitable beauty of the pictures of nature's painting which the glass of the camera throws upon the paper in its focus ... how charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably, and remain fixed upon the paper.

He goes on to call his paradoxical 'natural images,' "... creatures of a moment, and destined as soon to fade away."

The accent is familiar enough; if we substitute the elevated diction of Madison Avenue for Talbot's emaciated echo of Keats, we get something like the opening benediction that accompanies every new Kodak Brownie:

> Your camera is a magic black box for capturing precious moments that you will treasure for many years to come ... so always take your pictures carefully, and they will come out nice.

The latter text is imaginary, and disastrously typical; it shares with Talbot's account concerns that make up, as I shall contend, the (largely unconscious) preoccupations of still photography, to the present day.

There is nothing in the world less 'natural' than an image ... with the possible exception of silence: both are supreme artifices. To the undifferentiated consciousness all the sensible world must be continuously, and infinitely, replete. The act of distinguishing an image, that is, of partitioning a 'figure' from its proper 'ground' is, if we are to believe with Jean Piaget, one of the first heroic feats of emergent consciousness. Another, and contiguous, appalling accomplishment of developing sentience is the discovery that such figures are, or at least may be, continuously stable ... that they may persist, independently of our noticing them, even when we shut our eyes, or shift our gaze, or displace our perceptions in space and time. Upon the substrate of those two insights the infant mind erects a structure that is as intricate as the world, because, for the purposes of the animal within, it *is* the world.

The principles by which the sages and wizards of geomancy decree sites and vistas (and we all do that), or the reasons why the Japanese venerate a seemingly random tree, refuse to rise to the surface of the mind for inspection precisely because they are part of its endoskeleton, to which language has access only when it is as it were, cut to the bone, and another mind, which is never precisely either present or absent, may speak through the wound as through an accidental mouth.

Disregarding minor statistical variations, the landscape at Lake Como does not change, either, any more than it is handily dissected into images. What, then, is Talbot, who has got to use words when he speaks to us, talking about? Let us examine his circumstances for a moment.

First of all, he is far from his home at Lacock Abbey, in a delectable and strange place where vicissitude may prevent his ever returning. And then, he is immersed (incompetently, or he wouldn't be tracing his picture on an optical cheating device) in the fashionable activity of pretending to draw ... indispensable, for Englishmen in Italy, as the piano in Flaubert's received parlor ... when, with no warning at all, he sees, for its own qualities and for the first time, the very thing that has been before him all along, and that has been his secret fascination: he realizes, in one piercing instant, that the 'image' that he had sought to make is already there. But more: the emergence of that image somehow sufficiently mimes that extraordinary moment when, time out of mind, the unspeakable, primal IMAGE became the first gift Talbot's mind gave itself. And then: after the merest interruption, thready and insistent as the drone of the brain's *theta* wave, faintly overheard in an anechoic chamber, comes the accustomed reminder of mortality.

But for one instant, attenuated to the limits of his energy, Talbot has escaped Time, the Evil. For an ecstatic moment, time is not. We may presume that Lake Como, along with everything else, persists in dropping 'natural images,' like ripe fruit, into the lapses of the beholder. So that it was not the banal landscape Talbot thought he saw, but the radiant sight of his own insight, that transfixed the artist in a realization too rude for language: that the 'creature of a moment, and destined as soon to fade away,' was himself.

He had been to a far place, after all, and wonders had befallen him, and he wanted to bring home some intelligible account ... some disposition of sensible matter ... that might remain as a static sign of what had been a fugitive motion. In a life doomed, by the structure of language, as the lives of most Occidentals are, to supine acceptance of history as a linear narrative, that moment on the lake must have seemed a boulder in a rapids, which diminishes neither the force of a stream nor its volume, but rather, by virtue of the local turbulence it generates, serves to measure and demonstrate both.

I imagine, then, that Talbot believed he was somehow augmenting history, by implanting, into brief incisions new values as stable, as endlessly recurrent and irrational, as the decimal *pi*. Instead, his discovery ... and its consequences ... seem to establish clearly that there are two different sorts of perceptual time. I propose to call one of them historic, and the other, ecstatic.

But there is something that I cannot account for in any way. In 1835, Wordsworth's *dicta* must have hung pungent in the air. Perhaps Talbot was protected from literature by his inherited wealth, or by his other interests (he was a mathematician of sorts, and a Fellow of the Royal Society), as he was certainly protected from Beethoven or Büchner by that widest of oceans, the English Channel ... but we find here, in its purest form, the novel impulse to generate a work of art in the very heat of the moment of conception, and to hell with recollecting emotion, of all things, in tranquility.

Finally, rather chillingly, he suggests that it would be "charming." Indeed. Sometimes it's difficult to stay cheerful about the human mind. Anyway, with nascent Romanticism constrained to a vocabulary of that sort, it's no wonder the poets went abroad.

Your camera is a magic black box for capturing precious moments that you will cherish for many years to come....

We shall have to return, presently, to those precious moments.

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Historic time consists only of a past, whose chief claim to superiority is that we're not part of it. Science proposes to lay hold upon the future by an inversion of perspective, an adequation of vanishing points, invidiously treating the future as if it were a department of the past ... and the deception works for as long as the systems of memory and conjecture remain cramped into relative congruence. But the intellect (which is as Descartes reminds us, one of the passions) is a perfectly elastic medium which can only accumulate stress, in disequilibrium, for a limited time before rebounding with a force that has repeatedly shattered cosmologies. We find ourselves battered by the passing shockwaves of several such explosions at the present moment.

Historic time is the time of mechanistic ritual, of routine, automatic as metabolism. It is composed of sequential, artificial, isometric modules which are related to one another, in language, by the connective phrase: "and then." This sort of connection, like that between links in a chain, is capable of transmitting energy only under the tension of implied causality. The sentence: "Jack threw the ball and I caught it," does not establish a trajectory, but only marks its limits, in unyielding postures carved by Praxiteles.

In short, historic time retains its credibility only so long as we each abstain from testing its assertions against our personal experience. I can believe in my own quotidian history, so long as it passes unchallenged, because the ordained tale of hours and days offers me a vague comfort; if the clock ticks, and convinces me that time is passing, then something is happening, and I am reassured in the midst of my sad suspicion that most of life is remarkably unmemorable. But the prosecutor's opening question to the accused, "Where were you on the night of September 17th?" is one that, ordinarily, only a murderer could answer with certainty.

And when it comes to your history, I confess to utter skepticism. I can recall vivid encounters, and even whole ecstatic afternoons, that I've spent in your company, because they make up the warp of my own days ... but as I watched you through my window, crossing into the park and vanishing among the beech trees, you ceased to breathe, you disintegrated ... hastily reconstructing yourself, from a random shower of atoms, only seconds before we met, as design would have it, in the Museum, in front of Delvaux's painting, *The Echo*. The same thing happened to me.

Nevertheless this fiction of historic time, which we have just refuted, at once brightens us and wears us away, like the centuries of kisses bestowed upon the Fisherman's Ring. It even contaminates a present that we are left to embody, since, like Yeats' Truth, we may never know it.

"I am told," Borges writes in his essay, *A New Refutation of Time*, "that the present, the 'specious present' of the psychologists, lasts between several seconds and a tiny fraction of a second; that is how long the history of the universe lasts.... The universe, the sum of all events, is a collection that is no less ideal than that of all the horses Shakespeare dreamed of between 1592 and 1594...."

Even James Joyce, that most ardent of newsreel devotees, said that history was a nightmare from which he was trying to awake. It is obvious that historic time, though quite well suited to the needs of matter, is a terrain too sparse to afford the mind any lasting amusement or sustenance. So we must clear out, stand aside, and enter, if we can, the alternate and authentic temporality of ecstasy. I assume that everybody knows what that is.

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Questions concerning temporality have haunted photographers of every generation since Talbot; oddly enough ... for they have always been a notoriously unlettered bunch ... a number of photographers have even written on the matter. Not surprisingly, most of the writing is pseudo-scientific mystification, synesthetic gobbledygook, or plain evasion. In a 1911 note, all of three pages long, called *The Relation of Time to Art*, the painter-photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn achieves something of a *tour de forces* by mentioning his subject not at all, and then closes with an intriguing submerged metaphor that aborts just as it shows promise of being as fancy as any of my own.

Well, I may be getting nowhere also; what is important is the redundance of an urgent pressure to say something, as if to obviate any possible misunderstanding concerning the esthetic thrust of the new art ... as if to repudiate, in the spasmodic single gesture of a revulsion only half-sensed, the wavering concerns of painting, purifying and reclaiming for itself those perfected illusions, spatial and tactile, which alone could arrest consciousness, and suspend its objects of contemplation, outside the ravages of entropy.

We must remember that the most serious painter of Talbot's day was J.M.W. Turner, in whose centerless late works painting methodically abolishes perspective both geometric and atmospheric and, turning upon its own materiality with something like a vengeance, abandons all but the most tenuous claims to illusion.

On the other hand, photographers inherited, at the very outset, and hardly unawares, some centuries of hard-won knowledge of just the sort that painters were losing interest in: as much as the Renaissance, North and South, had learned of perspective, *chiaroscuro* and surface rendering, was simply incorporated by the lens-grinders into their optics ... so that photographers were able to plunge straightaway into the maze of time. Only color was lacking, and even that problem yielded, theoretically at least, in little more than a generation: the earliest color photograph dates to 1865. Which is not to say, at all, that painting has ever ceased to bedevil photography: no man who refuses to clean his house can remain long untroubled by vermin.

From the beginning, then, we shall find photographers employing a variety of strategies for confronting, and then eluding, historic time; and all of them are, as we shall see, operational in the present day. But before examining these strategies, I think, after all, that I should offer an example of consciousness at work in ecstatic time.

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Under certain conditions, we feel the measured passage of historic time to be altered, or to stop entirely. In the extremes of terror or rage, in erotic rapture and its analogues, in suicidal despair, in sleep, and under the influence of certain drugs, consciousness seems to enter a separate temporal domain, one of whose chief characteristics is its apparent imperviousness to language.

As I sit writing this text, on one of the days of the only life I shall live, a fine April afternoon is passing outside my window. Like a novelist, or a painter, I have walled myself into a room, away from the passage of time. Photography, uniquely among the visual arts, allows us to have our cake and eat it too: if I were making images, today, I could be outside, within that day, converting its appearances to the requirements of ecstasy. Instead, I am enmeshed in these very words. But I can't find words to tell you what it is like to be writing them.

Saints, the berserk and the possessed, speak in tongues (there is even something called *erotolalia*) and sleeptalkers speak our own language, but with impatient terseness and an alien inflection; so it is seldom that we have extended verbal reports from the domain of ecstatic time. From any point outside the general locus of art, I can recall only one.

Several years ago, a man by the astonishing name of Breedlove became, for the second time in his life, the holder of the world land-speed record. He did this thing at Bonneville Salt Flats, in Utah, in a rocket-powered car called The Spirit of America. For two runs over a marked course one mile long, with a five mile running start, this Breedlove averaged a little over 600 miles per hour ... slightly faster than the legally established speed of a trans-oceanic passenger jet. Had the ride been uneventful, we may expect that he would have had nothing at all to say about it; the efficient driving of an automobile at any speed neither requires nor permits much in the way of conscious deliberation.

But, as it turned out, something did happen. At the end of his second run, at a speed of about 620 miles per hour, as he was attempting to slow down, a brake mechanism exploded, and in the space of about one-and-one-half miles both drogue chutes failed to operate, and the car went entirely out of control, sheared off a number of handy telephone poles, topped a small rise, turned upside down, flew through the air, and landed in a salt pond. Incredibly, Breedlove was unhurt.

He was interviewed immediately after the wreck. I have heard the tape. It lasts an hour and 35 minutes, during which time Breedlove delivers a connected account of what he thought and did during a period of some 8.7 seconds. His narrative amounts to about 9,500 words, which is about as long as this text will be when I have finished writing, and it has taken me all my life.

In the course of the interview, Breedlove everywhere gives evidence of condensing, of curtailing; not wishing to bore anyone, he is doing his polite best to make a long story short. Compared to the historic interval he refers to, his ecstatic utterance represents, according to my calculation, a temporal expansion in the ratio of some 655 to one. Proust, Joyce, Beckett, seem occasionally to achieve such explicatory plenitude.

But perhaps Breedlove's most amazing remark came before all that. Rescuers, expecting to find him mangled as by a tiger, discovered him, instead, intact, prone at the pool's edge, still half in the water. He looked up and said to them, very distinctly: "For my next act, I'll set myself on fire."

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> Art is the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an aesthetic end.
> Question: Can a photograph be a work of art?
> Answer: A photograph is a disposition of sensible matter and may be so disposed for an aesthetic end but it is not a human disposition of sensible matter. Therefore it is not a work of art.
> —James Joyce, *Paris Notebook,* 28 March, 1903

I excerpt. We may judge the level of Joyce's perennial exasperation by an earlier question in his catechism: "Are children, excrements and lice works of art?" Perhaps I do no more than reveal the extent of my own exasperation, in remarking that the camera is an instrument neither less nor more 'human' than the typewriter upon which I now dispose intelligible matter to no esthetic end: Joyce, sensibly, preferred to ruin his eyes proofreading his own handwritten works of art.

But if human deliberation is a criterion for art, then Fox Talbot failed his dream ... and perhaps, in that failure, became an artist after all. The reason is simple enough, and enough, in another time, to drive anyone gifted with a shaman's vision to hack in fury at everything around him.

The photographic machine, simply put, is a device for accumulating energy. Talbot's machine was inefficient, his lenses narrow as eyes slitted against antarctic glare, his materials unreceptive to light. It took long minutes, rather than instants, to make his images. His means had betrayed him; Omar Khayyam's bird had flown even as he had it in hand. And he succumbed politely, tormented as he was, to that heartbreak known to every artist since Plato: the slow fabrication of an equivalent for his singular vision.

His household servants must have been models of patience, for he trained them to pose, motionless as children playing the game called Statues. We may imagine that he prayed, in a rapture of chagrin, for windless days. Where he had imagined a process of angelic velocity, he was constrained to work in a manner almost vegetative: his process resembled nothing so much as photosynthesis. Remarkably, his very first image was of the mullioned windows in his scholar's study ... which he escaped, through that other window, the camera, into a tense world of *tableaux vivants* whose inhabitants, wavering ever so slightly under false arrest, seemed perpetually about to break into a smile.

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> Question: If a man hacking in fury at a block of wood make there an image of a cow (say) has he made a work of art? Answer: The image of a cow made by a man hacking in fury at a block of wood is a human disposition of sensible matter but it is not a human disposition of sensible matter for an aesthetic end. Therefore, it is not a work of art.
>
> —James Joyce, *Paris Notebook*, 28 March, 1903

As I write this text, I am, if you will, carving in that pathless matrix of all tropes, language ... somewhat as a photographer, against or along the grain, follows the edge of his vision, in whatever mood he must, through the penetrable body of a world that is, or has just seemed to be, alive in every inquisition. Pretending, then, that what I now make is a fiction, I shall dissect from the dictionary the word 'window' and write a window into my scholar's study, and escape through it into the sunshine of an abrupt summary.

That other art that uses the camera, the cinema, of which we may not, for the moment, speak, has discerned and enunciated for itself a task, namely, the founding of an art that is to be fully and radically isomorphic with the kineses and stases – in short, with the dynamic 'structure' (if one may still dare to use that word) – of consciousness. Film art has, perhaps, been able to predicate for itself an ambition so appalling precisely because it is 'about' consciousness.

On the other hand, if still photography has seemed, since its beginnings, vastly pregnant with the imminence of a revelation that never quite transpires, and if it has never coherently defined a task for itself, we might make free to infer that it mimes, as does cinema, its own condition: we might imagine, in a word, that photography is 'about' precisely those recognitions, formations, percipiences, suspensions, persistences, hesitations within the mind that precede, if they do not utterly foreshadow, that discovery, and *peripeteia* and springing-into-motion, and inspiration that is articulate consciousness.

Now since I have professed that photography, from its first moment, never quite consciously addressed itself to that intuition we once called 'time,' I shall offer a brief inventory of the ways in which I think that happened.

First of all: photographers attempted a direct, frontal assault on narrative time. Photographs were jammed into sequences that told stories. Henry Peach Robinson's *Little Red Riding Hood,* in four installments, tells us as much more than we want to know as any of them. The poor dog, clothes-lined, sandbagged and trussed into the role of Grandma, speaks as well, for the plight of the image under the lash of the word, as any dog I know.

Secondly: with an improvement of means, and because the notion that had begun to struggle into the world in Talbot's initiating vision continued to press for admission, still photographers sought for that memorialization of the emergence of a figure from its ground that we still celebrate. The grand protagonist of this impulse was, and remains, Edward Weston.

Weston began, alongside his only contemporaries, Paul Strand and Alfred Stieglitz, with an interest in that mysterious antique thing, composition. Decades passing, as Strand repudiated the erotic possibilities of photography for its indexical functions, and Stieglitz came to posit the whole field of the photograph as energetic equivalent for emergent steady states of consciousness whose only names were his own images, Weston, more and more often, simply centered his figure, outside time and within the nominal spatial ground of the photographic artifact, celebrating, with unexcelled carnality, the differentiation of the moment of perception from all those moments of impercipience during which the resting brain processes only two billion binary bits of information per second.

Thirdly: a doctrine arose, purporting to exonerate photography as an art, that raised the specter of what I might call the Quintessential Sample. Henri Cartier-Bresson speaks of decisive moments, in tones that seem to suggest that the making of art is a process of tasteful selection. I have been privileged to see one of Cartier-Bresson's contact sheets: 36 images of a dying horse were as alike as intelligence could make them, and I am constrained to believe that the 'decisive moment,' if such a thing occurred, happened when the photographer decided which of the three dozen pictures he would print and publish.

Finally: the strategy of mapping time back upon space led a legion of explorers to astonishments hiding in the reaches of historic temporality. Eakins, Muybridge, Coburn, Marey, Morgan, Edgerton … a restless crew of refugees from painting, physiology and physics … have found lurking, in the compressed or expanded reaches of clock-time, entities of superlative beauty and terror: along with much that is pedestrian or equestrian, Edgerton's *Swirls and Eddies of a Tennis Stroke,* for instance, offers photographic proof that William Blake wasn't as crazy as he thought he was, and instructs us with its suggestion that artists may be least inventive where they are most visionary. These photographers, voyageurs in the continent of time, bring back records that recall the precisions of the diarist Scott, dying in Antarctica, or W.H. Hudson's curious Argentine dissolution of the membrane that had separated himself from his pretexts.

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Does our mind sometimes leave our body?

If written language is the shelter Recollection found, after her expulsion from the Garden of the Mind … and if Charles Babbage and the computer boys have banished Calculation from the human brain and locked her up in a brass machine … then I suppose a trap can be sprung for Memory as well. Is Memory more than the elastic set of all photographs, or is she less?

Before Alexander Graham Bell extracted my voice from my body, I used to bump into my friends once in a while. Now I only talk with them on the telephone. How grateful should I feel, for that?

Returning, once, to a palace of my childhood, I found its rooms small and shabby, admitting a caustic sunshine through dusty panes that looked out on shimmering prospects of nothing in particular. If I had only had a photograph of that house, I should have remembered it as it really was, whatever way that is, and then I would never had needed to see it again. If I ever return, I'll remember to bring along my camera.

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I seem to remember … it was before I took note of such things … the picture of a former American President on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*. Photojournalists had just then begun to use motorized still cameras which make serial exposures, in the manner of a semiautomatic rifle, at the rate of three per second. The Times, instead of extracting from the roll of film a single epiphany, simply reproduced all 36 consecutive images.

About two-thirds of them exhibited the President's face as a familiar icon of benignant, immobile, blandness. But the remaining dozen, more or less uniformly distributed, were pictures of a face that was not quite the same nor yet entirely different, whose expression suggested, during instants newly visible, the extremes of terror and of rage, suicidal despair, the forgetfulness of sleep, or the vacuity of utter confusion. It seems to me, almost, that another mind grasped and manipulated the features, reaching out with a kind of berserk certitude through temporal fissures whose durations could be measured in thousandths of a second.

Ray Birdwhistell, the pioneer explorer in what has come to be known, vulgarly, as *body language,* offers us, in his remarkable essay *The Age of a Baby,* a scene from nature that suggests similar dark speculations.

Investigating the kinesics of a household that had already brought forth two schizophrenic children, Birdwhistell filmed the mother in the banal and repetitive act of diapering the third child, a baby girl a few months old. Careful, frame-by-frame analysis of the cinema strip revealed that, during one moment in the process, the mother appeared to give the child simultaneous and contradictory signals, putting her in a confusing double-bind.

Birdwhistell states that rigorous examination of such films requires, on the average, about one hundred hours per running second of real time. He also points out that, within a family, many thousands of such brief, wordless exchanges take place every day.

If there is a monster in hiding here, it has cunningly concealed itself within time, emerging, in Birdwhistell's film, on four frames ... that is, for only one-sixth of a second.

If it is dragons we seek, or if it is angels, then we might reconsider our desperate searches through space, and hunt them, with our cameras, where they seem to live: in the reaches of temporality.

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During two decades after Edward Weston's death, photographic art remained unhappily frozen in the stasis he had bequeathed it. A thaw, in the past few years, has unblocked a flow of energy in two distinct directions. On the one hand, we find a strong resurgence of the manipulated pictorialism that Stieglitz and his generation, for the polemical needs of their own work, ruthlessly purged.

And on the other hand, a number of photographers have taken to making sequences of images that seem to derive from the history of still photography at large, taking their formal bearings from the journalist's 'picture-story,' and the ubiquitous illustrated instruction manual. Resembling a motionless cinema of indeterminate duration, they seem to rest upon the implicit (and extremely novel) assumption that the photographic cinema has never existed.

Two photographers have been especially persistent in finding out what revelations inhere in the sequential mode: they are Duane Michals and Leslie Krims. Both began with, and continue to make, as well, single images that implicate us in mysterious or terrific narratives. Both have proliferated iconographies that test the limits of obsession. Otherwise, they resemble one another not at all. Most recently, Michals' sequences have tended towards a paradoxical circularity that subverts the linearity of historic time into static, eternal loops and labyrinths. Krims' work, which appeals as often to inventory as to succession, achieves similar precarious satisfactions in that region where image and word perpetually contaminate one another, in a Mexican standoff between poisonous wit and jocular compassion.

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When it comes to practically everything, we seem to be of two minds.

The discovery that we have, each of us, two independent hemispheric brains, may yet prove an esthetic Krakatoa, the dust of which will never settle in our lifetime. For they seem, these two, caught in the act of going their separate ways, and at once forced into a cooperation that mixes uncertain affection with expedience.

We might imagine them as a couple of seasoned, quarrelsome lovers, whose affinities for one another are never quite comprehensible even to their closest friends. They inhabit one of those untidy households where the doors are never quite precisely open, nor yet completely closed.

We might imagine her as a bustling, quiet Hungarian whose last name sounds oddly like a French pun ... and him, as a punctilious, loquacious small shopkeeper in some commodity for which there is a steady, if unspectacular, demand. He thinks of her as an awesome pool of fecundity, a sexual abyss from whose precipice he longs to fling himself. She finds him erotically uninventive, for all his dirty-minded innuendoes, but consoles herself that her lover has the biggest cock on the block, and the finest mind of its kind. He admires himself for always knowing what day of the week it is, and for keeping his ledger ever ready for the tax collector; she has everything she needs, doesn't look back, and feels at once amused and bored by his incorrigible filing and cataloguing.

But what he really likes best to do is talk, talk, talk. Every so often, she shyly gets a word in edgewise, deliberately contradicting or mispronouncing something he has just said, and embarrassing him in company. But most of the time, she prefers simply to sit and look out the window, expressionless.

Once, in a sentimental moment, he joined her at the window. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he boomed, and slapped her on the back. "You son of a bitch," she hissed, so quietly that no one else could ever hear, "why do you have to murder everything by talking about it?" And then in a fit of venomous rage, she broke a chair over his head.

Things have never been quite the same between them since.

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Diane Arbus has left us images that affirm, in ways as various as themselves, this doubling, and duality, and duplicity, of our every experience. She made them, as she once found words to say, "because they will have been so beautiful."

She shows us identical twins, for instance, who might personify our twin minds, nine years old and already at war; or a brawny, tattooed circus performer, obviously a tough customer, whose paramount trait is a surface filigreed in elegance; or a standing naked man, his genitals tucked away between his thighs, 'being' a woman as if the verb to be were somehow made transitive; or a lonely Victorian mansion that is nothing but a facade. Freaks, nudists, transvestites, masked imbeciles, twins and triplets, inhabit an encyclopedia of ambiguities buried so far beneath language that we feel a familiar vague terror at the very suggestion of being asked to speak of them ... an irrational suspicion that, should we ever find and utter a name for what these images mean to us, we would so profane them that they might vanish liked Eurydice, or fall to dust.

Now, in this moment, as I see, once again, the photographs of Diane Arbus, these words that I drop behind me consume themselves as if by fire, evacuating the pathway of my thought as it is drawn to what is before it: namely, the images themselves. So that the phrase, 'in this moment' dissolves, in an obliteration of all moments, into my accustomed unspeakable fascination by images that seem to possess the vertiginous stability of dream, of *déjà vu* … or of those artifacts of the seeing mind, glimpsed before light broke upon the eyes, that coinhabit with palpable matter the whole space of the world. And after that dissolution of a phrase, the adverb 'once again' is annihilated, in my seeming surprise as these images, time and again, suggest that only a vicissitude of words segments their eternity into a mensurable time, invented, once, to resemble articulate space, that now no longer seems to matter.

These images, then, which offer me everything but words, enclose or apostrophize the exquisite stasis of a *tableau vivant* … tinted, to my disturbance and satisfaction, by my own lenses … divided by an impenetrable membrane that is neither quite gauze nor caul nor screen nor window nor yet mirror, within which, or through which, or upon which, two personifications fix one another in endless regard. In a posture of easy attention, image and word, *eros* and *thanatos,* eternity and time, multitudes of partnerships at once open and secret, stare each other and themselves into existence. Diane Arbus and I, more or less in focus, may even be among them: because she is gone, but never, to my pleasure, quite entirely absent … and I am here, but never, to my pain, quite entirely present.

Within our tableau, now, all these personages bear toward one another an archaic expression which we cannot quite comprehend. Sometimes it looks to us like a smirk of angry conceit … or again, as briefly, a vacuous grin of confusion. But sometimes, for an instant that will outlast us, we animate upon these ancient faces, suddenly as a veil of an aurora, a smile of triumphant happiness.

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> Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that bears me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges.
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges, *"A New Refutation of Time"*

FOR A METAHISTORY OF FILM: COMMONPLACE NOTES AND HYPOTHESES

"The cinematograph is an invention without a future."

—Louis Lumière

ONCE UPON A time, according to reliable sources, history had its own Muse, and her name was Clio. She presided over the making of a class of verbal artifacts that extends from a half-light of written legend through, possibly, Gibbon.

These artifacts shared the assumption that events are numerous and replete beyond the comprehension of a single mind. They proposed no compact systematic substitute for their concatenated world; rather, they made up an open set of rational fictions within that world.

As made things strong in their own immanence, these fictions bid as fairly for our contemplative energy as any other human fabrications. They are, finally, about what it felt like to reflect consciously upon the qualities of experience in the times they expound.

In order to generate insights into the formal significance of their pretext (that is, 'real history'), such fictions employ two tactics. First of all, they annihilate naive intuitions of causality by deliberately ignoring mere temporal chronology. And then, to our cultural dismay, they dispense, largely, with the fairly recent inventions we call facts.

These fictions were what we may call metahistories of event. They remain events in themselves.

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It is reasonable to assume that Dean Swift, desiring in his rage to confound the West, invented the fact.

A fact is the indivisible module out of which systematic substitutes for experience are built. Hugh Kenner, in *The Counterfeiters*, cites a luminous anecdote from the seed-time of the fact. Swift's contemporary savants fed dice to a dog. They (the dice) passed through the dog visibly unchanged, but with their weight halved. Thenceforth a dog was to be defined as a device for (among other things) halving the weight of dice.

The world contained only a denumerable list of things. Any thing could be considered simply as the intersection of a finite number of facts. Knowledge, then, was the sum of all discoverable facts.

Very many factual daubs were required, of course, to paint a true picture of the world; but the invention of the fact represented, from the rising mechanistic point of view, a gratifying diminution of horsepower requirement from a time when knowledge had been the factorial of all conceivable contexts. It is this shift in the definition of knowledge that Swift satirizes in *Gulliver's Travels,* and Pope laments in *The Dunciad.*

The new view went unquestioned for generations. In most quarters it still obtains: from which it should be quite clear that we do not all live in the same time.

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Who first centered his thumbs on Clio's windpipe is anyone's guess, but I am inclined to blame Gotthold Lessing. His squabbling progeny, the quaintly disinterested art historians of the 19th century, lent a willing hand in finishing her off. They had Science behind them. Science favored the fact because the fact seemed to favor predictability. Hoping to incorporate prophecy wholesale into their imperium, 19th-century historians went whole hog for the fact, and headfirst into what James Joyce later called the "nightmare" of history.

There were, quite simply, too many facts.

They adopted the self-contradictory stratagem of 'selecting' quintessential samples, and conjuring from them hundred-legged theories of practically everything. They had backed themselves into a discriminatory trap, and Werner Heisenberg wasn't there to save them: it was a time of utmost certainty.

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Isaac Newton spent the last part of his life writing a score of Latin volumes on religion: the nascent atomization of knowledge was a fierce wind from which he took shelter in his age. As young physicists, he and Leibniz had inherited the analytic geometry of Descartes, and the triumph of its use by Kepler to predict the motions of the planets. Algebraic equations dealt well enough with the conic sections, but Newton was absorbed by the motion of bodies that describe more intricate paths.

Complex movement in space and time was difficult to make over into numbers. The number 'one' was much too large; the mathematical fact must be vastly smaller. Even the arithmetic unit was surely an immense structure built of tiny stones: infinitesimal *calculi*, indivisible increments.

Given that much, it was a short step to the assumption that motion consists of an endless succession of brief instants during which there is only stillness. Then motion could be factually defined as the set of differences among a series of static postures.

Zeno had returned with his paradoxes to avenge himself through the deadpan Knight of Physics.

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In the 1830's, Georg Büchner wrote *Woyzeck*. Évariste Galois died, a victim of political murder, leaving to a friend a last letter which contains the foundations of group theory, or the metahistory of mathematics. Fox-Talbot and Nièpce invented photography. The Belgian physicist Plâteau invented the phenakistiscope, the first true cinema.

In the history of cinema these four facts are probably unrelated. In the metahistory of cinema, these four events may ultimately be related.

Fox-Talbot and Nièpce invented photography because neither of them could learn to draw, a polite accomplishment comparable to mastery of the tango later and elsewhere.

Plâteau had the calculus in his mother's milk, so that its assumptions were for him mere reflex. He took an interest in sense-perception and discovered, by staring at the sun for twenty minutes, one of our senses' odder failings, euphemistically called "persistence of vision."

His hybridization of a sensory defect with the Newtonian infinitesimal began vigorously to close a curve whose limbs had been widening since the invention of the alphabet.

Plâteau's little device started putting Humpty Dumpty together again. Like dozens of other dead end marvels, it became a marketable toy, and was succeeded by generically similar novelties: zoetrope, praktinoscope, zoopraxiscope.

All of them, unconsciously miming the intellectual process they instigated, took the form of spliceless loops: an eternity of hurdling horses and bouncing balls.

And they were all hand-drawn. Photography was not mapped back upon the sparse terrain of palaeocinema until the first photographic phenakistiscope was made, three generations later.

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The union of cinema and the photographic effect followed a clumsy mutual seduction spanning six decades. There was a near-assignation in the vast *oeuvre* of Eadweard Muybridge, before whose factmaking battery of cameras thousands paraded their curiously obsolete bodies.

In one sequence, piercingly suggestive of future intricacies, the wizard himself, a paunchy naked old man, carried a chair into the frame, sat down, and glared ferociously back at his cameras.

But the series suggested to Muybridge only the ready-made analogy of book space: successive, randomly accessible, anisotropic with respect to time. Accordingly, he published them as editions of plates.

The crucial tryst was postponed, to await the protection of two brothers bearing the singularly appropriate name of Lumière.

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The relationship between cinema and still photography is supposed to present a vexed question. Received wisdom on the subject is of the chicken/egg variety: cinema somehow 'accelerates' still photographs into motion.

Implicit is the assumption that cinema is a special case of the catholic still photograph. Since there is no discoverable necessity within the visual logic of still photographs that demands such 'acceleration,' it is hard to see how it must ever happen at all.

It is an historic commonplace that the discovery of special cases precedes in time the extrapolation of general laws. (For instance, the right triangle with rational sides measuring 3, 4, and 5 units is older than Pythagoras.) Photography predates the photographic cinema.

So I propose to extricate cinema from this circular maze by superimposing on it a second labyrinth (containing an exit) – by positing something that has by now begun to come to concrete actuality: we might agree to call it an infinite cinema.

A polymorphous camera has always turned, and will turn forever, its lens focussed upon all the appearances of the world. Before the invention of still photography, the frames of the infinite cinema were blank, black leader; then a few images began to appear upon the endless ribbon of film. Since the birth of the photographic cinema, all the frames are filled with images.

There is nothing in the structural logic of the cinema film strip that precludes sequestering any single image. A still photograph is simply an isolated frame taken out of the infinite cinema.

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History views the marriage of cinema and the photograph as one of convenience; metahistory must look upon it as one of necessity.

The camera deals, in some way or other, with every particle of information present within the field of view; it is wholly indiscriminate. Photographs, to the joy or misery of all who make them, invariably tell us more than we want to know.

The ultimate structure of a photographic image seems to elude us at the same rate as the ultimate structure of any other natural object. Unlike graphic images, which decay under close scrutiny into factual patterns of dots or lines, the photograph seems a virtually perfect continuum. Hence the poignancy of its illusions: their amplitude instantly made the photograph—within the very heart of mechanism—the subversive restorer of contextual knowledge seemingly coterminous with the whole sensible world.

Cinema could already claim – from within the same nexus – a complementary feat: the resurrection of bodies in space from their dismembered trajectories.

The expected consummation took place at quitting time in a French factory, on a sunny afternoon towards the end of the century, as smiling girls waved and cheered. The immediate issue was an exceptional machine.

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Typically, all that survives intact of an era is the art form it invents for itself. Potsherds and garbage dumps are left from neolithic times, but the practice of painting continues unbroken from Lascaux to the present. We may surmise that music comes to us from a more remote age, when the cables were first strung for the vertebrate nervous system.

Such inventions originally served the end of sheer survival. The nightingale sings to charm the ladies. Cave paintings presumably assisted the hunt; poems, Confucius tells us in the *Analects*, teach the names of animals and plants: survival for our species depends upon our having correct information at the right time.

As one era slowly dissolves into the next, some individuals metabolize the former means for physical survival into new means for psychic survival. These latter we call art. They promote the life of human consciousness by nourishing our affections, by reincarnating our perceptual substance, by affirming, imitating, reifying the process of consciousness.

What I am suggesting, to put it quite simply, is that no activity can become an art until its proper epoch has ended and its has dwindled, as an aid to gut survival, into total obsolescence.

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I was born during the Age of Machines.

A machine was a thing made up of distinguishable 'parts,' organized in imitation of some function of the human body. Machines were said to 'work.' How a machine 'worked' was readily apparent to an adept, from inspection of the shape of its 'parts.' The physical principles by which machines 'worked' were intuitively verifiable.

The cinema was the typical survival-form of the Age of Machines. Together with its subset of still photographs, it performed prizeworthy functions: it taught and reminded us (after what then seemed a bearable delay) how things looked, how things worked, how to do things ... and, of course (by example), how to feel and think.

We believed it would go on forever, but when I was a little boy, the Age of Machines ended. We should not be misled by the electric can opener: small machines proliferate now as though they were going out of style because they are doing precisely that.

Cinema is the Last Machine. It is probably the last art that will reach the mind through the senses.

It is customary to mark the end of the Age of Machines at the advent of video. The point in time is imprecise: I prefer radar, which replaced the mechanical reconnaissance aircraft with a static anonymous black box. Its introduction coincides quite closely with the making of Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon,* and Willard Maas' *Geography of the Body.*

The notion that there was some exact instant at which the tables turned, and cinema passed into obsolescence and thereby into art, is an appealing fiction that implies a special task for the metahistorian of cinema.

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The historian of cinema faces an appalling problem. Seeking in his subject some principle of intelligibility, he is obliged to make himself responsible for every frame of film in existence. For the history of cinema consists precisely of every film that has ever been made, for any purpose whatever.

Of the whole corpus the likes of *Potemkin* make up a numbingly small fraction. The balance includes instructional films, sing-alongs, endoscopic cinematography, and much, much more. The historian dares neither select nor ignore, for if he does, the treasure will surely escape him.

The metahistorian of cinema, on the other hand, is occupied with inventing a tradition, that is, a coherent wieldy set of discrete monuments, meant to inseminate resonant consistency into the growing body of his art.

Such works may not exist, and then it is his duty to make them. Or they may exist already, somewhere outside the intentional precincts of the art (for instance, in the prehistory of cinematic art, before 1943). And then he must remake them.

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There is no evidence in the structural logic of the filmstrip that distinguishes 'footage' from a 'finished' work. Thus, any piece of film may be regarded as 'footage,' for use in any imaginable way to construct or reconstruct a new work.

Therefore, it may be possible for the metahistorian to take old work as 'footage,' and construct from it identical new work necessary to a tradition.

Wherever this is impossible, through loss or damage, new footage must be made. The result will be perfectly similar to the earlier work, but "almost infinitely richer."

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Cinema is a Greek word that means 'movie.' The illusion of movement is certainly an accustomed adjunct of the film image, but that illusion rests upon the assumption that the rate of change between successive frames may vary only within rather narrow limits. There is nothing in the structural logic of the filmstrip that can justify such an assumption. Therefore we reject it. From now on we will call our art simply: film.

The infinite film contains an infinity of endless passages wherein no frame resembles any other in the slightest degree, and a further infinity of passages wherein successive frames are as nearly identical as intelligence can make them.

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I have called film the Last Machine.

From what we can recall of them, machines agreed roughly with mammals in range of size. The machine called film is an exception.

We are used to thinking of camera and projector as machines, but they are not. They are 'parts.' The flexible film strip is as much a 'part' of the film machine as the projectile is part of a firearm. The extant rolls of film out-bulk the other parts of the machine by many orders of magnitude.

Since all the 'parts' fit together, the sum of all film, all projectors and all cameras in the world constitutes one machine, which is by far the largest and most ambitious single artifact yet conceived and made by man (with the exception of the human species itself). The machine grows by many millions of feet of raw stock every day.

It is not surprising that something so large could utterly engulf and digest the whole substance of the Age of Machines (machines and all), and finally supplant the entirety with its illusory flesh. Having devoured all else, the film machine is the lone survivor.

If we are indeed doomed to the comically convergent task of dismantling the universe, and fabricating from its stuff an artifact called *The Universe*, it is reasonable to suppose that such an artifact will resemble the vaults of an endless film archive built to house, in eternal cold storage, the infinite film.

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If film strip and projector are parts of the same machine, then 'a film' may be defined operationally as 'whatever will pass through a projector.' The least thing that will do that is nothing at all. Such a film has been made. It is the only unique film in existence.

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Twenty years ago, in the grip of adolescent needs to 'modernize' myself, I was entranced by Walter Pater's remark that "all the arts aspire to the condition of music," which I then understood to approve of music's freedom from reference to events outside itself.

Now I expound, and attempt to practice, an art that feeds upon illusions and references despised or rejected by other arts. But it occurs to me that film meets what may be, after all, the prime condition of music: it produces no object.

The western musician does not ordinarily make music; his notation encodes a set of instructions for those who do. A score bears the sort of resemblance to music that the genetic helix bears to a living organism. To exist, music requires to be performed, a difficulty that John Cage abjures in the preface to *A Year from Monday*, where he points out that making music has hitherto largely consisted in telling other people what to do.

The act of making a film, of physically assembling the film strip, feels somewhat like making an object: that film artists have seized the materiality of film is of inestimable importance, and film certainly invites examination at this level. But at the instant the film is completed, the 'object' vanishes. The film strip is an elegant device for modulating standardized beams of energy. The phantom work itself transpires upon the screen as its notation is expended by a mechanical virtuoso performer, the projector.

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The metahistorian of film generates for himself the problem of deriving a complete tradition from nothing more than the most obvious material limits of the total film machine. It should be possible, he speculates, to pass from *The Flicker* through *Unsere Afrikareise*, or *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, or *La Région Centrale* and beyond, in finite steps (each step a film), by exercising only one perfectly rational option at each move. The problem is analogous to that of the Knight's Tour in chess.

Understood literally, it is insoluble, hopelessly so. The paths open to the Knight fork often (to reconverge, who knows where). The board is a matrix of rows and columns beyond reckoning, whereon no chosen starting point may be defended with confidence.

Nevertheless, I glimpse the possibility of constructing a film that will be a kind of synoptic conjugation of such a tour – a Tour of Tours, so to speak, of the infinite film, or of all knowledge, which amounts to the same thing. Rather, some such possibility presents itself insistently to my imagination, disguised as the germ of a plan for execution.

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Film has finally attracted its own Muse. Her name is Insomnia.

Eaton, New York
June, 1971

NOTES ON COMPOSING IN FILM

IN A LETTER of the year 1914, the poet Ezra Pound tells his correspondent that it took him ten years to learn his art, and another five to unlearn it. The same year saw the tentative publication of three cantos for a "poem of some length" that was to become, though nameless and abandoned, the longest poem in English ... prominent among whose denumerable traits are a lexicon of compositional tropes and a thesaurus of compositional strategies that tend to converge in a reconstitution of Western poetics.

Since it has been widely asserted that art can be neither taught nor learned, that it is a gift from Jehovah or the Muse, an emanation from the thalamus, or a metabolite of the gonads, we may pause to wonder what Pound, a failed academic and life-long scholar of diverse literatures and arts, meant by the verb *to learn* ... let alone *unlearn*. In the same letter, Pound himself is obliquely illuminating; he had begun, he says, around 1900, to study world literature, with a view to finding out what had been done, and how it had been done, adding that he presumes the motive, the impulse, to differ for every artist.

A few years later, in the essay *How to Read,* Pound diffracts the roster of poets writing in English into a hierarchic series of zones, of which the most highly energized comprise 'inventors' and 'masters.' The essay, like most of Pound's prose writing of the period, is addressed primarily to other (presumably younger) writers; it is permeated by Pound's highly practical concern for what might be called an enhanced efficiency in the process of 'learning' an art. We need not look very deeply to find, inscribed within the pungent critical enterprise that extends and supports his concern, a single assumption: that one learns to write by reading. Moreover, one learns to write mainly by reading those texts that embody 'invention,' that is, the vivid primary instantiation of a compositional strategy deriving from a direct insight into the dynamics of the creative process itself.

Implicit, finally, is the assertion that the compositional process is the oversubject of any text whatever: in short, what we learn when we read a text is *how* it was written. To put it more generally, a paramount signified of any work of art is that work's own ontogeny. Partially masked though it may be by the didactic thrust of Pound's critical writing, this insight is by no means atypical; in fact, where we do not find it among the procedural givens of any major artist of the century, we experience a certain malaise, as if confronting a mental anomaly whose gestural consequences somehow elude detection. Indeed, at this moment we find ourselves at a critical pass that divides work that is serious from work that is not, quite precisely along the boundary between reflexiveness and naiveté.

According to a new transposition of the ancient notion that the artist is nothing other than a conduit for energies that he incarnates in the things he makes, the Elsewhere whence those energies come is now imagined to be, in the largest sense, the 'material' of the art itself. For example, the notion that language, considered as a discorporate faculty of an entire psycholinguistic community, should, of its own nature, tend to secrete poems, is our legacy from the Symbolists. By implication, the work of the poet must be an investigation into the internal economics and dynamics of language; a theory of poetry, an enunciation of the axiomatics of language; and the poem, a demonstration consequent upon the self-interference of these axiomatics.

As for the activity of poetry, so also for poesis at large. Without a similar understanding with regard to music, to painting, or to film, the work of a Varèse or a Berg, a Mondrian or a Pollock, an Eisenstein or a Brakhage, is not only impenetrable, it is utterly unapproachable. But, given that much, and nothing more, the individual work of art is virtually self-explicating: to understand it is to be struck by the nature of art, and indeed, in some measure, by the nature of thought itself.

Thus the artist of the modernist persuasion outlines, if he does not utterly preempt, the terrain, the contours, of that critical activity which shall best serve language in its anguished compulsion to encompass and account for every other code: a criticism, that is, that shall direct its attention to the energies deployed in the compositional process rather than to the matter disposed in its result.

And if it is true that the object before us thus clearly predicts the vector of our research, then we might expect as well that close observation of that object will yield specific methodological prescriptions.

Since the learning, the understanding of an art consists in the recovery of its axiomatic substructure, we can begin to say that the 'unlearning' that Pound cites as indispensable to new creation, consists in the excernment, castigation, and transvaluation of that axiomatic substructure. New composition, then, may be seen as an activity synonymous, if not coterminous, with the radical reconstitution of the imbedding code. It is in the context of such a reconstitution that we must understand Eliot's celebrated observation that every really new work modifies, however subtly, the equilibrium of every other term in its traditional matrix. Indeed, at its most fecund, a drastically innovative work typically calls into question the very boundaries of that matrix, and forces us to revise the inventories of culture ... to find out again, for every single work of art, the manner in which it is intelligible.

Our examination of the process of composition must radiate from a close scrutiny of the ways in which artists have anatomized and transubstantiated the assumptions of the several arts. Rather than simply postulating the existence of this compound activity as an undifferentiated field, we should attempt at the very outset to construct an explicit paradigm of the ways in which axiomata are transformed. The revision appears to transpire in one or another of two modes, the first of which we might agree to call reading and the second, misreading.

The mode we call reading entails a correct extrapolation of the axiomatic substructure from the artist's immediately apprehensible tradition. Once the set of axioms has been isolated and disintricated, the artists may proceed to modify it in any of four ways: by substitution, constriction, augmentation, or by displacement. A single example will illustrate each of these ways.

1. When Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg received the tradition of music into their hands, a norm of composition stipulated that the deforming criterion of tonality must be superimposed upon the centerless grid of the chromatic scale. Reasoning that the extraction of a subset of diatonic intervals from that scale amounted to the acceptance, *a priori,* of a nucleus of melodic material, the serialists deleted entirely the axiom of tonality and *substituted* for it another: that every work must be generated in its entirety from melodic material that would guarantee its access, at any moment, to an unconstricted field of compositional options. Only a row that comprised the entire chromatic octave could do this.

2. In reply to a publisher who demanded that he expunge or modify certain portions of his Dubliners, James Joyce wrote that it was not possible to change or subtract so much as single word. He had written his stories, he said, according to his own best understanding of the "classic canons" of his art. But every serious writer tries to do as much; and yet very few may be construed as setting such store by these single words. If it is self-evident that the canons of writing may be derived from the works that make up a tradition, nonetheless what works and what authors are included in that tradition is by no means obvious. For his own purposes, Joyce has *constricted* the axiom: the works from which he has derived the laws that govern his writing are those of one author, Gustave Flaubert, the encyclopaedic comedian who once spent six days on the engineering of a single paragraph that imperceptibly negotiates a transition from the active to the passive voice ... and who dreamed of writing a novel about Nothing.

3. From Fielding onward, it is a discernible assumption of prose fiction, understood as a homeostatic system, that no element that enters the work may exit until it has been accounted for. Prior to Joyce, this assumption had not been extended to cover very much beyond the *dramatis personae.* In *Ulysses,* Joyce seizes upon this axiom, and *augments* its force, applying it without exception to every detail of the work, both structural and textural. On the structural level, the title of the book is no casual allusion; rather, every episode in the voyage of Odysseus has its precise counterpart in Joyce's palimpsest. Early on, among Bloom's ruminations, we hear him mindspeak:

"Potato. I have." What about potato? We are sure to find out, some three hundred pages later.

4. It has been customary to assert, of words interacting with one another, that each word is, as it were, segmented into a dominant part, or denotation, and a subordinate attenuated series of connotations. Some have reasoned that writing consists in joining denotations, in such a way as to suppress connotation; others have been content to let the connotational chips fall where they may; and a third school proposes to fabricate the connotational subtext and to let the denotative text take care of itself. But if we examine words, whether as a system of marks ordered upon a surface, or a system of sounds disturbing the air, we can discover no difference between the manner in which they denote and the manner in which they connote.

It is possible, then, to view the denotation of a word as no more than that particular term in a series of connotations which has, through the vicissitudes of history, won the lexicographical race. In a word, a denotation is nothing more than the most privileged among its fellow connotations. In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce, while implicitly accepting the assumption that words are made up of parts, *displaces* the privilege of the denotation, making of the word a swarm of covalent connotations equidistant from a common semantic center. Which such connotations will be identified with the notation, then, is decided in each case not within the cellular word, but through interaction with its organic context.

All axiomatic sets that derive in any of these four ways from the mode we have called 'reading' have one thing in common: they entirely supercede their predecessors, and thus, sooner or later, assume the historical role of all norms. In the moment that a new axiom vanishes into the substrate of an art, it becomes vulnerable. On the other hand, this is not true of those novel structural assumptions that derive from the mode that we have called 'misreading.' The incorrectly read or imperfectly disentangled compositional assumption invariably remains to haunt the intellectual space usurped by its successor. Thus new works building upon axioms derived by misreading from the structural assumptions of older works, must be forever contingent. Our experience of such works ... that is, recovery of the rules governing their composition ... goes forward with the strain of a double effort, for we must ourselves simultaneously read and misread. In such a predicament, where the sum of compositional options never fully presents itself as a single figure clearly separated from the ground of cultural givens, the new work risks impenetrability, presenting itself in the aspect of an open set that elides, rather than emphasizes, the articulations among the elements and operations of which it is composed.

For an artist who would question the conventional boundaries of the artist's relation to the act of making, the risks consequent upon intentional misreading will seem justified. Crucial to one normative view of the relation between artist and artifact is the assumption that every trait of a work owes its presence to a deliberate decision made by the artist. The composer John Cage, by way of a constellation of intricate stratagems of abdication, has deflected the force of this assumption. The adoption of a whole phylum of procedures, called "chance operations," as a pathway alternative to rationalizing intentionality, has resulted in making the artist more conspicuous by his presumed absence. That Absence which replaces the artist cannot, by definition, 'choose'; it can only make non-choices. To choose is to exclude; to negate choice is, by implication, to include everything. But to subvert the notion of choice is to invert the intellectual perspective within which choice operates. To make non-choices is to situate oneself, as an artist, at an intersection of inclusion and exclusion where, in the absolute copresence of every possible compositional option and every conceivable perceptual pathway, the notion of choice becomes irrelevant. For example, to inquire whether or not any particular realization of *Fontana Mix* is superior to any other, is to pose a meaningless question, for there is no fixed thing called *Fontana Mix*. Cage has derived seminal work from an intentional misreading of the axiomatics that have encapsulated the artist's task, contending that composition is the devising of ways to recognize, and annihilate, every test for distinguishing art from non-art. This is not to say that there is no such thing as art, or that everything is art; rather, it is to state that there can be no certainty, no final determination, about where we may expect to find art, or about how we are to recognize it when we do find it.

That our examples, in the present writing, have been drawn either from literature or from music (an art that has had a long and various commerce with language) reflects doubly upon the state of research, and indeed upon the possibilities for research, in film. In the first instance, it is obvious that language and film subsist within incommensurable spaces. To render film accessible to written discourse, it is necessary that it be studied under conditions that permit random access to the text in both space and time. In the second instance, it is imperfectly obvious that film, an art that we might characterize as verging upon adolescence, remains profoundly conditioned by mutually contradictory or inhibitory axiomatic substructures derived by both reading and misreading from every literary type, from music, and from the more venerable visual arts.

If we grant that the goal of our research is to recover the axiomatics of composition in film, and to discover among them a dynamic morphology, then we must necessarily find the following conditions indispensable:

1. We must reject at the outset any suggestion that film, thus far, exhibits a coherent normal paradigm. Most especially, we must meet with skepticism the assertion that the narrative fiction film, with synchronous sound track, offers such a paradigm. Even during the heyday of its empire, the hegemony of the fiction film was seriously challenged on the axiomatic level by competing genres: instructional, documentary, newsreel.

2. We must have available to us, in a manner that encourages and facilitates deliberate investigation, the cinematic material. That is, we must be able to take the film strip in hand, at our extended leisure, and examine it frame by frame and splice by splice.

3. We must bring to our research into the working assumptions of film, a thorough grasp of the axiomatics of every discipline from which film has willingly or unwillingly, borrowed ... because, for our purpose, the whole history of art is no more than a massive footnote to the history of film.

It is only after we have accomplished these three conditions that we shall be able to attempt the most important:

4. We must invent a terminology, and a descriptive mode, appropriate to our object: a unique sign that shall have as its referent the creative assumptions proper to film and to film alone. The compound sign and referent is, of course, a closed system; and all closed systems, as we know, tend to break down and to generate discrepancies and contradictions at their highest levels. On the other hand, inquiry into the nature of film has reached its present impasse on account of contradictions at the very lowest levels of discourse, instigated by the casual expropriation of terminologies from other arts.

Hitherto, the study of film has been compartmentalized horizontally, in a search for diachronically parallel evolutions, and vertically, by a rough typology that distinguishes cinematic species from one another according to their social use. Such a morphology assumes that individual films, and indeed entire bodies of work in film, are isolated objects; it implies that understanding of film involves nothing more than determining its precise location on a predetermined grid.

We propose another, radically different morphology ... one that views film, not from the outside, as a product to be consumed, but from the inside, as a dynamically evolving organic code directly responsive and responsible, like every other code, to the supreme mediator: consciousness.

We base our morphology upon direct observation of how films are actually made. The making of a film is an action which may be seen as comprising two stages. At first, the material of a film is generated. That material is nothing else but the image-bearing film strip; to generate it is to film a pretext, that is, to impress images upon the photographic emulsion. Then, the cinematic material is structured. To structure the cinematic material is to determine, by whatever means, which film strips shall enter the composition and which shall not, whether they shall enter the composition entirely or in part; and in what order the film strips shall be joined. This second stage in the activity of film-making is usually called editing; a number of film-makers have argued that the editing process, sufficiently generalized, may extend into, and even engulf, the gathering of cinematic material (filming). For some film-makers, editing is nothing more than the closure of a scheme that has pre-established every quality of the cinematic material, and every aspect of its gathering. For others, to edit is to decode into rationality the implications of cinematic material gathered in an intentional void. Between these two poles, as between filming and editing, there is no zone of demarcation, but rather a horizontally modulated continuous field.

Again, the process of film-making has variously been seen as independent from or contingent upon the imperatives of other codes. Where film has been seen as subordinate to language, film composition has amounted to nothing more than the realization of a minutely specific scenario. Whenever the act of film-making has achieved full independence from language, a *découpage*, or metric shot-list, empirically synthesized after the fact of the completed work, displaces the scenario in a gesture of temporal inversion. Often, the scenario becomes rarefied, taking the shape of brief verbal directions, graphic sketches, or even numerical notations;

at its most remote, the 'script' dwindles to a more or less complete previsualization within the eye of the mind. The intellectual space between these meridians of intentionality is, again, modulated continuously, and vertically.

From a cartoon of this alternate morphology, we may easily construct a model for detailed investigation, selecting four film-makers whose work suggests that they diverge from one another as far as possible with respect to the vertical axis of intentionality, and with respect to the distribution of their energies in the structuring of a work mapped along the horizontal axis. We might elicit from these four artists all the materials pertaining to a single film; such materials must necessarily include not only prints of uncut footage to match against the finished work, but also every retrievable scrap of concrete evidence relating to the compositional process.

Of course, if these four personages do not exist, then it is our humane duty to invent them.

* * *

> And I will tell, by the same token, for those kind enough to listen, according to a system whose inventor I forget, of all those moments when, neither drugged, nor drunk, nor in ecstasy, one feels nothing.
>
> —Samuel Beckett, *First Love*

This text was written for and delivered at the Conference on Research in Composition at the State University of New York at Buffalo in October, 1975.

MEDITATIONS AROUND PAUL STRAND

"They say that we Photographers are a blind race at best; that we learn to look at even the prettiest faces as so much light and shade; that we seldom admire, and never love. This is a delusion I long to break through....

—Lewis Caroll, 1860

IS STILL PHOTOGRAPHY fated to wrestle forever with its immemorial troubles?

A year ago, a student of mine explained, with great agitation, why she was giving it all up: there was "no history of thought" in photography, but only a "history of things." During 130 years of copious activity, photographers had produced no tradition, that is, no body of work that deliberately extends its perceptual resonance beyond the boundaries of individual sensibility. Instead, there was a series of monuments, mutually isolated accumulations of 'precious objects,' personal styles more or less indistinctly differentiated from the general mass of photographic images generated "by our culture, not by artists," from motives merely illustrative or journalistic.

Furthermore, every single photographer had somehow, for himself, to exorcise the twin devils of painting and the graphic arts: there was, seemingly, no way for photography to cleanse its house. Master and journeyman alike had to face down, in a kind of frozen Gethsemane, the specter of the plastic arts. She had wearied of it.

Twelve years before, less than certain of an alternative, I had wearied too. So I baited here, and listened. What would she do? Why not embrace the monster, and paint? "Good God, no," she answered, "that would be even worse!"

There was only one thing to do: she would make films. And then: "What I mean is, films are made for the mind; photographs seem to be only for the eye."

And again: "Anyway, all photographs are beginning to look alike to me, like pages of prose in a book." Did I know what she meant?

She meant that they all "looked as if they had been made by the same person."

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If 20th-century American photography has given us as many as three grandmasters, undisputed by virtue of their energy, seniority, and bulk of coherent *oeuvre,* then their names must be Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston. The first and last are gone; Strand alone, Homerically, survives.[1]

Stieglitz, a volcanic figure whose precise mass has never been rigorously assayed, was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1864; he was Paul Strand's mentor (so says Strand) and died in 1946. The transplanted Californian, Weston, born in 1886 (between Pound and Eliot), was confirmed in his true vocation during a 1920 visit to New York, in the heyday of *Camera Work* and "291," where he saw photographs by Stieglitz and Strand, and met both. Weston died on New Year's Day, 1958.

We are given, for the first time since his 1945 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, a view of the whole work of Paul Strand, in a massive exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There are nearly 500 prints, together with the films for which Strand must bear crucial esthetic responsibility.[2] The show is accompanied by the publication of *Paul Strand/A Retrospective Monograph/The Years 1915-68,* a large quarto volume which contains, along with biographical and bibliographical material, and a systematic nuggeting of texts by and about Strand, acceptable reproductions of more than half the photographs in the show.

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Paul Strand himself supervised in detail the installation of the show and the design of the book. The results of both efforts vary from ordinary expectation in ways that illuminate Strand's convictions on the nature and cultural meaning of photographic images. So I shall have to examine their suggestions at some length, and also take up, along the way, some fundamental problems implied by photographs at large.

To begin with: the word 'retrospective' is sufficiently misleading, in this case, to suggest important dissociations. Nearly all the prints in the show are new, made and matched especially for the occasion. (Consider, for a moment, the unimaginable parallel case in painting!)

What Strand has actually made, during 53 years, is a large number of negatives.

The negative has somewhat the same relation to the photographic print as the block has to the woodcut, with the important difference that the curatorial notion of 'states' does not apply to photographs. That is, the graphic artist's plate suffers gradual attrition during the pulling process, whereas a virtually infinite number of prints may be generated from the information stabilized in a single negative.

But the photographic result is no more fixed or automatic than the graphic. In the hands of a gifted printer, a single negative may be made to yield prints of the most extraordinary variety. I would compare the process to that of deciphering the figured basses in baroque keyboard works: given a sufficiently wide rhetorical field to work in, there must finally obtain the possibility of shifting a whole work from one to another mutually contradictory emotional *locus* by the variation of a single element.

I seem to be speaking, of course, of what has been derogated as *nuance;* and there is a strain in the temper of modern art that has found suspect any tendency to locate the qualities of art works outside the direct conceptual responsibility of the artist, in 'performance' or 'interpretive' values. But for Strand (himself the craftsman-performer of his stock of negatives) such concerns amount, as we shall see, to very much of his art.

Nuance is a superficial matter. But photographs are, in the precise sense, perfectly superficial: they have as yet no insides, it would seem either in themselves or inside us, for we are accustomed to deny them, in their exfoliation of illusion, the very richness of implication that for the accultured intellect is the only way at all we have left us to understand (for instance) paintings.

To put it quite simply, a painting which may be, after all, nothing but some paint splashed on canvas, is comprehended within an enormity which includes not only all the paintings that have ever been made, but also all that has ever been attributed to the painterly act, seen as abundant metaphor for one sort of relationship between the making intelligence and its sensed exterior reality. The 'art of painting' seems larger than any of its subgestures ('paintings'), protecting, justifying, and itself protected and justified as a grand gesture within the humane category 'making.'

Contrariwise, photography seems to begin and end with its every photograph. The image and its pretext (the 'portrait' and the 'face,' which bear to one another the relationship called 'likeness') are ontologically manacled together. Every discrete phenomenon has its corresponding photograph, every photograph its peculiar subject; and after little more than a century, the whole visible cosmos seems about to transform itself into a gigantic whirling rebus within which all things cast off scores of approximate apparitions, which turn again to devour and, finally, replace them.

We are so accustomed to the dialectics of 20th-century painting and sculpture, that we are led to suppose this condition is a sorrow from which photographers hope for surcease. But this simply is not true, on balance; and most certainly not in Strand's case. Rather, a stratagem by no means peculiar to Strand, but detectable in the work and published remarks of photographers in every generation since Stieglitz, has consisted in insisting (with considerable energy) upon the primacy of photography's illusions and, simultaneously, upon the autonomy of the photographic artifact itself.

The larger esthetic thrust of photography has concentrated, not upon annihilating this contradiction, as painting seems always to verge upon doing, but instead upon containing it: since the West is still largely populated by closet Aristotelians, we are far from inheriting all the wealth that may be born to the mind in entertaining, equidistant from a plane of contemplative fusion, two such evidently antagonistic propositions. However, in photography, the paradox lies at the very core of the art, refusing to be purged.

For Paul Strand, both these interlace and are succintly bracketed in a single notion: Craft. For it is by craft that illusion reaches its most intense conviction, and by craft also that the photograph is disintricated from other visible made things, through regard for the inherent qualities of photographic materials and processes. Craft is, moreover, a complex gesture, which begins with a formal conception and precipitates in the print.

So we return to the exhibition: hundreds of such precipitate.

Yet I should like to pursue this matter of photographic prints into still further distinctions, since they are, after all, the only evidence we have.

Let us suppose, for a moment, that every work of art consists of two parts: a deliberative structure, and an axiomatic substructure. The structure is what is apparent, that is, the denumerable field of elements and operations that constitute the permanent artifact of record. Barring corruption by moth and rust, it is immutable – and of course it is here that art, curiously, used to spend so much of its energy, in consolidating physical stability.

The substructure consists of everything the artist considered too obvious to bother himself about – or, often enough did not consider at all, but had handed him by his culture or tradition. Axioms are eternal verities—subject, as we have begun to see, to change on very short notice.

There was a time when art concerned itself with its structure merely: what art itself *was* seemed clear enough. That every single work of art assumes an entire cosmology and implies an entire epistemology (I take it this is the Goldbach's Theorem of analytic criticism) had occurred to no one. And they called it the Golden Age.

We are accustomed to examine the axiomatic assumptions of any work of art (or of anything else) – to examine its substructure, in short, in stereoscopic focus with its structure. Concentration of attention upon what is assumed, upon the root necessity of an art, is called radicalism.

Photography came in 1839 into an axiomatic climate of utmost certainty. What art was, and what it was for, were known. The photograph simply inherited the current axioms of painting. It became a quick and easy method for meeting most of the conditions prescribed for the art object: it 'imitated,' according to the strangulated contemporary understanding of that verb. By the 1890s, painting had begun to examine its own assumptions and bequeath those it discarded to the photograph, which had long since bifurcated: there was the photographic 'record,' and then there was photographic Art. The former went its own way; the latter imitated currently fashionable (not radical) painting.

Enter Stieglitz, who came, in time, to sense that the photograph merited at least a generic substructure of its own – whose reflex sympathies (he had been trained as a photoengraver) moved him eventually to choose an alternate pathway: the photograph that, if it had not repudiated the assumptions of art, was, at least, indifferent to them. At this remove, many of Stieglitz' prints still look suspiciously like art, but his *Steerage* remains a talisman as acute as any in photography. He was an able polemicist, and "291" was a sure and defensible critical act – but he was not a particularly nimble or warm theorist.

Enter Paul Strand, a man very much younger, of drastically different temper. It must be admitted that some of his earliest work also looks like art, and moreover like modern art. But is quite clear from his photographs and from his early writing[3] that he saw, instantly:

> 1. Photography must separate itself immediately from painting and the graphic arts.
>
> 2. The separation must be based upon sensible axiomatic differences directly related to illusion.
>
> 3. Photography must insist upon the special materiality of its own process.

It is easy enough to assent to all this, although the arguments were certainly fresher in those days, and their paragraphs more open to the mysterious options of self-cancellation. But then – indistinctly (and three generations later, they still are not wholly focussed) – come intimations of a novel insight.

If I read Strand correctly, his reasoning runs thus:

> A. The structure of the photographic image is wedded absolutely to illusion. As photographers, we are committed to the utmost fidelity to spatial and tactile illusion.
>
> B. *Mais d'abord, il faut être poète.* No two men, however perfect their illusionary craft, make commensurable photographs from the same pretext.
>
> C. These differences must somehow be accounted for. So they must lie within the substructure of the work, that is, among its cosmological and epistemological assumptions.
>
> D. Therefore, every parameter of the photographic process ("... form, texture, line, and even print color ...") directly implies, and defines, a view of reality and of knowledge.

In so conceiving the structure of a work as entirely 'given,' and locating all control in its axiomatic substructure, Strand originates an inversion of Romantic values that is still in the process of assimilation. To the sensibility oriented towards painting, quite extreme parametric variations on a single photographic image must seem no more than pointlessly variant 'treatments' of an icon. But to a mind committed to the paradoxical illusions of the photographic image, the least discernible modification (from a conventionalized norm) of contrast or tonality must be violently charged with significance, for it implies a changed view of the universe, and a suitably adjusted theory of knowledge.

In cleaving thus to sensory *données,* the photo grapher suggests a drastically altered view of the artist's role. The received postures of Spirit Medium and Maker nearly disappear. On the deliberative level, the artist becomes a researcher, a gatherer of facts, like Confucius' ancients, who, desiring Wisdom, "sought first to extend their knowledge of particularities to the uttermost." And on the axiomatic level, where the real work is now to be done, the artist is an epistemologist.

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The quest for nominally perfect fidelity to spatial and tactile illusion excludes the very concept of style as irrelevant; and 'development,' within the lifework of one man, yields to increasingly exhaustive rigor of Archimedean approximation. (In portraiture, for example, expression is to be avoided, for it must necessarily interfere with the study of physiognomy.) Ideally, the fully disciplined artist should be able to visit the same site on two occasions decades apart and return with identical images.

Carried to its logical outcome, the ambition of this activity can amount to nothing less than the systematic recording of the whole visible world, with a view to its entire comprehension. And that is a sober enterprise indeed.

Thus the importance for Strand of what he calls 'craftsmanship,' and thus also the importance of the print. In reprinting nearly every photograph for the present exhibition, Strand is conforming the investigations of a lifetime to his current (presumably mature and perfected) view of the world. So that this retrospective view of his work is not for us, the spectators, alone; it is not even primarily ours, for we have never seen the prints he made in 1916 from the negatives of that year. Nevertheless, he holds them in his own mind: this retrospective is for Strand himself.

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The photographs are hung, in single or double rows, at eye level. They are presented with the most severe uniformity, in wide white mattes, behind glass, in narrow white frames. The gallery walls are white. There are no captions or dates, but only the most unobtrusive small numbers, and these do not run serially. The prints are not arranged chronologically. The treatment is reminiscent of microscope slides – somewhat disordered cross sections from the tesseract of Strand's sensibility – or criminological photographs from old Bertillon files.

Most of the prints fall within the bounds of 8 by 10 inch paper, although a very few go to 11 by 14 and a few more are smaller. Strand seems indifferent, but hardly insensible, to classic prohibitions against cropping. A small number of prints are toned: I assume these are the oldest in the show. Occasional prints are extremely grainy: that the superimposed syntax of grain is 'admissible' is surprising.

With a single exception, Strand appears to accept the standard painterly categories of portrait, landscape, still life, abstraction (the latter remains strictly referential, and is achieved through extreme close-up and adroit cropping: a familiar device of which Strand is co-originator). Each category is dealt with from a few carefully standardized points of view. Landscapes, seldom peopled, are of two sorts: a wide panorama, on the one hand, and on the other – where there are man-made structures – a near middle distance characterized by flattened, geometric frontality and extremely delicate attention to the boundaries of the image-rectangle. Portraits are frontal, posed. They are Roman busts. (But there are a few full-lengths, and an extensive subset of heads.) There are few interior architectural spaces but a relative abundance of exterior architectural detail, often carved wood or stonework related to Christian iconography. Images of animals are rare, and then most often parenthetical: friends who have spent time (and have themselves photographed) in Mexico, Mediterranean Europe, and Africa, Strand's own sites, have commented upon this with amazement.

Finally, there is one category entirely missing: the nude. There simply are not any images of the nude human figure at all. And then, as if to underscore deliberately the omission, one is obliged to reckon with the presence, on loan from Strand's private collection, of a quarter-scale bronze sculptured nude by Gaston Lachaise, long a close personal friend of the photographer. I am constrained to consider what Strand has in fact done – and not what he has omitted or avoided doing – but I cannot help but record my absolute astonishment at this; it is a *lacuna* which contradicts much that I had divined of Strand's esthetic, for there is nothing elsewhere, in either his work or his writing, which suggests that anything under the sun might be exempt from the scrutiny of his lens.

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I have said that the ordering of photographs, in both the show and its strictly parallel monograph, pointedly avoids both chronology and titling. Nonetheless, there is a principle of organization.

The small numbers on the mattes refer us to placards posted occasionally throughout the exhibition space, which describe each image by title (when there is one) – and always by date and locale. And it is by locale in fact, that the prints are sorted. Strand has returned often to his accustomed sites, and two adjacent photographs from Vermont, for example, may be dated 30 or 40 years apart. (Predictably, they differ from one another no more than they might if made on consecutive days.) The photographer, if he could go on working for a few more millennia, might photograph the whole terrain of the world; the local human fauna seem almost excrescences of the landscape and local architecture.

The barest attempt to reconstruct a diachrony meets with the photographer's implicit reproof: information is never withheld, but it is made effectively inaccessible, since its pursuit necessitates endless trips from photograph to identifying legend and back again. The meaning is quite clear. Still photography has, through one and another stratagem, learned to suspend or encode all but one of our incessant intuitions: I refer to what we call time. Paul Strand seems consciously intent, in his presentation of his work as in the work itself, on refuting time. It seems distinctly forbidden that the problem shall ever arise.

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Paul Strand's work has been praised by everyone who has ever written about it, and I will not presume to praise it further. It has been called everything. Stieglitz called it "pure," and thereby perhaps founded our abuse of that adjective; others have called it "brutal" and "elegant" (though it is curious that no one person has thought it both). But I should like to say something about the residue of feeling I am left with, at the brief remove of three weeks: the entire exhibition rhymes perfectly twice with every photograph in it: once in its unbearably sumptuous appearance – and again, in the exquisite chastity of its assumptions.

> Through the years, a man peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, tools, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face.
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> —Jorge Luis Borges

New York City, 1972

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1. Strand's work ended a year after this writing.
2. Strand has been a professional cameraman for a large part of his adult life and so has probably shot scores of films. I refer only to: *Manahatta*, 1921 (with Charles Sheeler); *Redes*, 1933; *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1935 (directed by Paré Lorentz); *Native Land*, 1942.
3. Three early essays contain, as it were, the Analects of Paul Strand; later items in his bibliography do not modify appreciably the views expressed in: "Photography," *Seven Arts*, August, 1917, pp. 524-26. "Photography and the New God," *Broom*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1922, pp. 252-58. "The Art Motive in Photography," *The British Journal of Photography*, Vol. 70, 1923, pp. 612-615.

IMPROMPTUS ON EDWARD WESTON: EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

The greatest potential source of photographic imagery is the human mind.

—Leslie Krims

By all means tell your board [of Trustees] that pubic hair has been definitely a part of my development as an artist, tell them it has been the most important part, that I like it brown, black, red or golden, curly or straight, all sizes and shapes.

—Edward Weston, in a letter
to Beaumont Newhall, 1946

IN 1960, a few days before Christmas, a midwestern museum mounted, for the first time since 1946, and three years after the artist's death, a major retrospective of the photographs of Edward Weston. I had been sojourning in Ohio for some months, and decided to see that exhibition before returning to New York. I arrived in the early afternoon of the only day I had allotted myself, to discover that over 400 prints were on view. Finding those few hours too short a time to spend with the work, I hastily changed my plans, and stayed in town for another day.

The flight that I would otherwise have taken, inbound from Minneapolis, collided in midair over Staten Island with another aircraft. The sole survivor, a ten year old boy, fell two miles into the streets of Brooklyn. I well remember a newspaper photograph from that day: the broken child, surrounded by ambulance attendants and police, lay on the pavement in front of an *iglesia pentecostál* called Pillar of Fire.

Since then, I have never been able to decide whether Weston tried to kill me, or saved my life. For reasons more abstract, I suspect that many photographers, over the past thirty or forty years, have felt the same way.

■ ■ ■

> If the recording process is instantaneous and the nature of the image such that it cannot survive corrective handwork then it is clear that the artist must be able to visualize his final result in advance. His finished print must be created in full before he makes his exposure, and the controlling powers ... must be used, not as correctives, but as predetermined means of carrying out the visualization.

Out of the Ages we seem to have retained no more than a few hundred saints. But modernism in the sciences and in the arts seems to bring forth secular saints at the drop of a hat. Sainthood for artists seems to derive from a terse refusal to address oneself to questions about one's work, disguised as a moral aphorism.

Among major sculptors, Auguste Rodin and David Smith will never achieve sainthood; but Constantin Brancusi, who is on record with no more than ten prose sentences, achieves a sanctity that tends to make his work invisible, tacitly admonishing against critical examination. Somewhere in the firmament, at this very moment, the cunning Rumanian soul announces once more that Direct Cutting Is the True Path to Sculpture, and choiring angels sing hosannas around him.

The roster definitely includes such mortifiers of the flesh as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Alban Berg, who qualifies as a kind of crazy saint, like Mechtild von Magdeburg. Those not yet fully canonized, but definitely among the beatified, include Martha Graham, Diane Arbus, Georgia O'Keefe, and a number of other candidates to whom no miracles have yet been attributed (not even the minor one of resuscitating otherwise stagnant academic careers). Wherever there are saints, there must also be heresiarchs like Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, and heretics. For this last category, I would like to recommend the film-maker Michael Snow and the photographer Leslie Krims.

Heresiarchs are chiefly of interest to other heresiarchs; whereas saints are of interest to everyone who, aspiring to sainthood, recoils before the heretical suggestion that any work of art that can be killed by critical scrutiny is better off dead. As for the rest of us who toil upon the sands and seas of art, we are just Workers, and our myth is still 'under construction,' though it dates at least to J.S. Bach, who once answered a question with the words: *"Ich musste fleissig arbeiten."*

If still photography has produced a single saint, then that one is indisputably Edward Weston. St. Edward is one of your manly, businesslike saints, like Ignatius Loyola, who received his vocation only in maturity, after a time of roistering and soldiering. In Weston's case, the two halves of that career seem constantly to be superimposed. The assertion perpetually quoted, that The Photograph Must Be Visualized In Full Before The Exposure Is Made, is scarcely an example of the complex wit of a grand aphorist. Rather, it comes to us as a commandment, brooking no reply or discussion. The Weston Codex abounds in such utterances, any of them a match for Brancusi.

The tone is invariably resounding, reassuring, and, above all, utterly proscriptive. We recognize it in the advice of a Japanese master of *sumi* painting, who tells us that the ink is best ground by the left hand of a fourteen year old virgin (presumably she must be right-handed!) as in Ad Reinhardt's animadversions on pure spirits of turpentine and the preparation of canvases: it always proposes an amelioration in its proper art – and always gives rise, eventually, to a mean and frigid academicism.

As we cut direct in wood or stone or metal, we are told, we must surely be on the True Path to Sculpture. If we can but learn to Previsualize The Photograph In Its Entirety, then we can be certain that we have mastered the first prerequisite to ascending the photographic Parnassus. To so much as hear the words of the commandment magically curses the hearer: one can neither obey nor disobey; for to disobey is to forfeit Art; and to obey is to declare oneself, at best, a disciple of the Master. The very possibility for work, for the construction of a *praxis*, has been preempted. Perhaps the photographer would be better advised to shoulder a tripod, and walk inland until someone asks if it is a prosthetic device. It was in some such fashion that sculptors, for a time, transformed their chisels into tools to dig in the earth.

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> Since the nature of the photographic process determines the artist's approach, we must have some knowledge of the inherent characteristics of the medium in order to understand what constitutes the aesthetic basis of photographic art.... The photographer ... can depart from literal recording to whatever extent he chooses without resorting to any method of control that is not of a photographic (i.e., optical or chemical) nature.

There is this to say about the possession of a thinking apparatus (what we call a mind, in this case): one cannot *not* think; even to attempt to do so, is painful. But it is also difficult to think; and it is the more difficult because one has got to think about something in particular.

In the act of listening to music, of hearing, apprehending it, one thinks, vigorously, without thinking about anything in particular; so that one is given the pleasure of exercising the instrument of thought without the pain of having to direct that exercise toward anything that is not, as it were, already taken into thought, that is outside the instrument itself. Whence, then, the 'universality' of music. We might pause to ask what we mean when we say we understand a piece of music. Presumably we mean something different from what we mean when we say we understand a spoken utterance or written text in a natural language.

There is one sort of understanding that we can attribute to both: a grammatical and syntactic understanding which we have from real-time analysis of the harmonic structure, the rhythmic structure, of a piece: the retrieval, let us say, of a generating dodecaphonic row, and the manner in which that row is manipulated in order to produce what we hear ... which seems to resemble the process of understanding a sentence by parsing its grammatical structure. In order to understand a natural language artifact in this way, we must strip it of all specific reference: for 'Jack ran,' we might write, 'proper noun/verb intransitive.' Thus far, our understanding of language is like our understanding of music: or this is a part of what we mean when we say we understand music – whereafter, the musical work is immediately transparent to its mediating culture. Music is a code stripped of everything but its own specifications.

But that is not all that we mean when we say we understand a natural language artifact. In that moment when one suddenly comprehends, encloses within one's own thought, a work in music ... or a mathematical theorem ... the sensation is not that of having determined the referent of a word (an immediate, but minor, gratification that language offers). Rather, one experiences the sensation of being struck by thought itself.

It has been possible to say that pictorial spaces, the spaces generated and inhabited by the visual arts, may be parsed: that it is possible to recover from these artifacts a 'grammar,' a 'syntax,' and indeed more: a 'diction.' Images are socially comparable to music, in that an uncertain understanding of them can and does cross psycholinguistic boundaries. It is possible to strip painting of everything but its own specification. After we have got rid of the *putti,* bananas, tigers, naked women, it is nevertheless still possible to have painting: a code stripped of all but a description, a 'metapainterly' specification of grammar, syntax; what was called Style has often amounted to no more than statistics on the potential size of a 'diction.'

It would seem impossible to strip the photograph in the same way, because the photograph, in affirming the existence of its pretext, would appear to be ontologically bound to it: Nature (that is, everything on the other end of the lens), is all of grammar, all of syntax, Diction of dictions, alpha and omega, Oversign of Signs. If we attempt to strip the photographic image to its own specifications, we are left, in the case of the projected image, with a blank screen, with a Euclidean surface; if we strip the photographic print, we run aground upon an emptied specification that is no longer a photograph. It is only, and exclusively, a piece of paper.

Why undertake to strip the photographic code? To determine the absolute, irreducible set of specifications for a code is a typically modernist enterprise in the arts. Expunging item after item from the roster of cultural imperatives, we come, eventually, to a moment when the work at hand is no longer recognizably picture or poem; in this moment, we know that we have mapped at least a single point on the intellectual boundary of what must constitute an image or a linguistic artifact. During this century, music, painting and sculpture, dance and performance, have entered into this process of self-definition ... a process, moreover, into which film has recently invested new and massive energies. We find, for instance, an entire body of work, which has been seen as a critique of cinematic illusionism, testing whether illusionist space itself is properly part of the grammar of film, or only part of its diction: I refer to the work of Paul Sharits.

This enterprise has not, however, been systematically pursued with seriousness, or anything approaching rigor, in still photography, which has therefore tended to remain isolated, an enclave within modernism, a practice atavistic in its unselfconsciousness, a magnificent but headless corpus, an aesthetic brute whose behavior is infallible, perfectly predictable, and doomed by its own inflexibility. At this extremity, then, it is only fair to point out that Edward Weston was virtually the first photographer to make an effort to define the bare set of specifications for a still photographic art.

Weston adopted a strategy that is perfectly familiar to us, proposing to identify the work of art with its own material rather than with its pretext. This reduced his problem to that of determining the nature of the material, and in turn suggested a second common strategy, that of circumscribing as drastically as possible the list of attributes of the photographic material. If we are not always convinced that Weston thought through his posture with utter clarity, nonetheless we must take care to note the severity with which he applied his chosen set of axioms in his artistic practice.

Still, to identify the photograph wholly with its own material could not completely satisfy Weston, and indeed it cannot satisfy us, because the photograph is, in fact, like language, doubly identified: once with itself, and once again with its referent; thus, modernism had to set for itself a second grand problem, namely, to strip the pretext of the visual image or the referent of the linguistic artifact to its own proper set of specifications as well.

The very presence of a natural language utterance in the world already asserts two things: that something is being said, and also that some Thing is being said. It is not difficult for us to perceive in the mature writing of Samuel Beckett, of Jorge Luis Borges, of Alain Robbe-Grillet, a determination to strip the Thing that is being said, the referent of the discourse, to its own set of specifications, by making the very substance of the text refer to the materiality of language. We may trace the origins of this latter process of definition, within literature, through Joyce and Valéry to Mallarmé and Flaubert. It goes without saying, that the work of specifying not only the possibility of saying, but also what may be said at all, is long and arduous, so that we never received from his own hand the delicious project that Flaubert had hoped to begin after the completion of *Bouvard et*

Pécuchet, that is, the writing of a novel about Nothing. But how is an artist who would attempt to recover both the bare specifications for a photographic image and the bare specifications for the photographic pretext to proceed with the second task? We cannot make a photographic image that is a picture of nothing.

But perhaps there is a way out, after all. Literary modernism in its latter development adopted a strategy which we might call displacement, whereby temporal and causal connections within the text are systematically forced out, made virtually irrelevant, their claims annihilated, by 'equating' the literary text with an illusionist pictorial image. Again and again, we find texts that amount to nothing other than minute descriptions, in flat, declarative sentences, of spaces, of objects disposed within those spaces, of the surface and volumetric attributes of those objects. In Beckett, in Robbe-Grillet, in Borges, we are accustomed to notice, at first, that nothing appears to be happening. Causality and temporality having been dispossessed from the text, we are left free to enjoy the gradual construction of the space within our consciousness which the text will occupy, as we experience the process of reading in a time, that of the spectator, which is explicitly and entirely disjunct from the atemporality of the text itself.

I would suggest that we might detect in Weston's photographs the nascence of a similar strategy of displacement. The possible set of pretexts for a photograph is reduced to a set of abstract categories, deliberately taken wholesale from illusionist painting – Portrait, Landscape, Nude, *nature morte* – which, taken together, make up a rigid spatial typology. Weston repeatedly abjures the 'snapshot,' with a vehemence that enlarges the term to encompass most of the photographs that have ever been made. In the midst of a century and a half of photographic activity, during which the frame has been populated by an overwhelming profusion of spaces, as its rectangle has become that indivisible point, that Borgesian *aleph* within which we see all the universe, that blank arena wherein converge at once the hundred spaces that Paul Klee longed for, this is extraordinary. The incessant reiteration of such a decision throughout a vast body of work finally transcends the polemical.

We must also remember that there may be strategies more elegant and powerful for accomplishing the same end, that are simply and permanently rendered inaccessible by Weston's *a priori* refusal to manipulate, to lay a hand on, his photographs, confining his bodily intervention to their subjects, his objects. Such strategies, however, are not to be discovered, like smooth, round stones on a beach, and dropped into an overcoat pocket. They must be invented. Some have reasoned that they are all of invention.

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> In the time the eye takes to report an impression of houses and a street the camera can record them completely, from their structure, spacing and relative sizes, to the grain of the wood, the mortar between the bricks, the dents in the pavement.... In its ability to register fine detail and in its ability to render an unbroken sequence of infinitely subtle gradations the photograph cannot be equalled by any work of the human hand.

To the sparse list of spatial caricatures annexed from representational painting, Weston appends one further item: he photographs surfaces; and, as well, he sometimes so deprives deep spaces of their perspectival indicators that they appear to us as surfaces during the appreciable interval required by our effort to reinstate, from scanty evidence, the lost pretextual space. Arguing from a narrow experience of painting (which includes, as we know, the Mexican muralists Rivera and Orozco) he presupposes that he can permanently evade the troublesome paradoxes of illusionist painting, with its perpetual oscillation between inferred depth and aggressive materiality, by suppressing its recognizable marks of craft, of manual labor; by mechanizing the act of making, he would evacuate the maker, put him resolutely out of the picture. The photographed surface ... and it is always an insistently 'interesting' one, replete with entropic incident ... at once corroborates and is ennobled by the condescendingly lapidary surface of the photographic print, which stoops to conquer everything under the sun.

Twenty years ago, one heard it boasted in New York that some painters had achieved work that 'looked like' nothing else except painting. If we are willing to set aside such concerns as scale, chromaticity, and thumbprint evidence of human intervention (and the Abstract-Expressionists must have been willing to do so, else they would not have admired Aaron Siskind's contemporaneous photographs of surfaces) then we confront a double irony: that Weston, exclusively equating painting with its procedures, and disregarding its appearance, had made photographs that proleptically were to resemble paintings to be made a generation later; and painters had finally achieved, in that future, work that looked like photographs that had been made twenty years before. If Abstract-Expressionism echoes and amplifies the expectations of Symbolist poetry, aspiring to prove that the materials of the art could be depended upon to bring forth paintings as surely as language itself secretes the poem, then these antique photographs must charm by virtue of their authenticity, suggesting that the broad side of a barn is at least as likely to produce the appearance of art (which is nothing if not appearance) as all our strivings and conundrums. The photographic act, furthermore, gathers to itself a certain prizeworthy power: with a swiftness and parsimony that makes the utterance of a single word seem cumbersome, it accomplishes its ends in an instantaneous, annunciatory gesture. Finally, Edward Weston meets an aphoristic requirement: he does not stop photographing when the dinner bell rings, but only when he reaches the edge of the frame.

For all that the photographer's frame derives from the painter's, regurgitating it whole, and shares with it a fundamental rectilinearity, differences between the two remain to be accounted for. The painter's frame marks the limits of a surface which is to be filled with the evidence of labor; the photographer's frame, sharing the accustomed rectangle with the standardized opportunities of painting and, also, with those of the printed page, resuscitates its own distant origins in post-and-lintel fenestration: it purports to be, not a barrier we look at, but an aperture we look through. Most bodies of work in still photography may readily be seen as picaresques whose denuded protagonist is none other than the abstract delimiter of the frame, bounded in a nutshell but traveling through infinite spaces howsoever fate, or desire, or vicissitude may command; while, from the very first, Daguerre's dioramas entertain the notion of a photographic imagery as big as life, photographs have largely remained small, contenting themselves in matters of proportion (or what is called aspect ratio) and ignoring those of scale.

The frame presents itself to the painter as a set of options and to the photographer as a constellation of severe constraints. Photographic materials 'come' in sizes and proportions dictated by industrial conveniences disguised as cultural givens, and limit the secondary ratio between the absolute size of an image and what can reside within our field of vision at normal reading distance … much as the arbitrary width of the canvasmaker's weft and the nominal dimensions of urban architectural spaces have, within recent memory, set a limit upon the scalar ambitions of painting.

And yet, it is not quite correct to say that Weston's photographs of surfaces 'look like' Abstract-Expressionist paintings, not even at those relative viewing distances from which both subtend a visual angle small enough to transform them into unitary signs centered on the retina. Rather, they resemble monochrome reproductions of such paintings, or, better still, *reproductions* of meticulous renderings, by a *trompe-l'oeil* painter, of Abstract-Expressionist canvases, done in miniature, with the sensuous delicacy of line, and minute attention to the suppression of painterly surface, of an Ingres.

And yet Ingres, though he is an illusionist of volumes and of a strict subset of the properties of surfaces (color, and yieldingness or hardness) effaces most of the tactile indicators that we ordinarily associate with his cherished pretexts, the nude female body and such other caressables as blossoms, pelts, fabrics: an irreducible iconography of eroticism. But it is a detactilized eroticism. Our pleasure in the work derives not at all from any suggestion that we might enter the space of the painting (we are blandly excluded from it) and touch its pretext; what Roland Barthes would call the *jouissance* that we may have from an Ingres painting arrives when, with a certain indrawing of the breath, we suddenly comprehend that there are ecstasies of restraint as well as ecstasies of abandon.

Ingres's line, in his drawings, is nominalized, standardized, and displayed upon a surface of industrial featurelessness, as if produced by a machine of extreme precision designed to do something else entirely, which generates the drawing that we see to document a proof that that other thing is being, indeed has been, accomplished. Were such drawings to be made by human beings it would be necessary to train away the stubbornness of the drawing hand, replacing it with the patient, infinite exactitude of the tip of the tongue.

Weston repeatedly asserts that the qualities of the photographic print are dependent upon, derive from, qualities of the artist's perception at the moment of making, of exposing a member of that unique class of objects, the photographic negative. This must imply; in what Weston likes to call 'lay language,' that the photograph can never be fully intelligible without reference to the photographer; and it presents us, as spectators, with a dilemma: we can neither discard these precious scraps of paper whose immanence, whose copious presence, enters a strong claim on our attention ... nor can we ever hope to understand them fully. Do Weston's photographs somehow look different now that he is gone? We can never know. But it seems clear that in the hour of his passing they did not, for instance, turn crimson and explode. What, then, is it that the artist may be supposed to share with his photographs?

The photographic image, for Weston, affirms the existence and enforces the persistence of its immediate pretextual object and thereby of its grand pretext, namely, the space in which that object subsists. The artist reaffirms his own existence through gradually replacing the space of the given world with the inventory of spaces of all the photographs he has made. It may be that Weston's refusal to emancipate his images from the patriarchal house of his own perceptions amounts to nothing more than the simple declaration of a territorial claim.

The artist is fugitive; the photographs aspire to the monumental permanence of empty signs; the rectangle of the frame is made a stage upon which the photographer mounts a high drama of contingency, disputing with his chorus of things the absolute ground of existence. The photographs mutually affirm the claim of the artist and the existence of his object. Neither lobe of this simultaneous affirmation is impaired by the absence, or exalted by the presence, of the other. Through the mediating power of illusion Weston may coinhabit, with a host of strangers, dumb things, lovers, Space Itself. The photographer, Event that he must know himself to be, can join in the easy commerce of spatial intercourse with his pretexts, because he has conferred upon them the status of Eternal Objects, drastically redefining their claim, as aggressive as his own, upon the crucial territory. It is remarkable that Weston never quite gets around to making an honest woman of his own aesthetic doctrine, forever insisting upon his right to deny it, and yet united with it in that special, inextricable bond reserved for longstanding common-law relationships.

Eroticism, in all its implicit and explicit forms, is a particular mode of knowing; more than that, it is a school of thought, that insists not only upon the physical body of the object of desire, but also upon what we might call its temporal body. Gesture, habit, modulation, establish, in time, within the mind of the knower, a *virtual* space whose contours are those of the temporal body of the known; and, if all goes well, it is this creature of time that becomes the true object of desire. What are called things, which behave not and are susceptible only of corruption, are without such temporal bodies and so we habitually confer them, endlessly manufacturing brief experimental fetishes out of doorknobs and paper weights. The dish ran away with the spoon.

If it so happens that nothing, including ourselves, can fully be known until it is somehow made the object of desire, and if our knowledge must forever be mediated by codes and by illusions, then the still photograph, as expounded by Weston, in perpetuating a single instant in time, must remain, for all its repletion of knowables, a defective way to know, leaving something to be desired. Savages naked in the dawn of mechanized illusion though they may have been, the aborigines of that continent we call the 19th century must have sensed this, else they would not have struggled so to bring into the world a cluster of artistic means which we still call cinema, a compound way to know the temporal body of the world. Film was born into that silence bequeathed it by the still photograph, saving its first cries for the end of its adolescence. Is Eros mute?

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> The photograph isolates and perpetuates a moment of time: an important and revealing moment, or an unimportant and meaningless one, depending upon the photographer's understanding of his subject and mastery of his process. The lens does not reveal a subject significantly of its own accord.

In a celebrated passage in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant concludes that the three categories available to human reason are Space, Time, and Causality. Weston is everywhere concerned, as are so many other still photographers, with the annihilation of time. The image is to subsist, not in a time, but in all of time, taking for its duration the supreme temporal unity of eternity. In reclaiming the noun from the depredations of the verb, Weston snatches his beloved things from the teeth of causality, orphically rescuing them from the hell of entropy; and, orphically again, at the snap of the shutter, as if at the utterance of a word or the incantation of a song, causing these opacities to compose themselves into durable and serene hieratic geometries, Euclidean rather than Pythagorean, worthy of Eduard Tissé.

In so detaching these apparitions from causality and from time, Weston binds them to his own purposes, immobilizes them, transfixes them in an airless Space, rendered aseptic as if by a burst of lethal radiation. At the moment of their eternalization, Weston delivers his things to himself and to us, much as William Carlos Williams once said that he wanted his words: "scrubbed, rinsed in acid, and laid right side up in the sun to dry."

That generic space, so prepared, is one with which we have been familiar for some time. It is composed only of visibilities embedded in their own vicinities, uniformly and brilliantly illuminated. The factual surface upon which they are to be made available to us, by the processes of projective geometry, is featureless, but nonetheless distinctly present, firm but slightly yielding, either perfectly black or perfectly white, according to the needs of the moment. It is, in short, the surface of a dissecting table upon which all the most intimate secrets of the object are to be laid bare. It is a space within which, or surface upon which, we have long since come to expect to find beauty in chance encounters. Weston's self-confessed and notorious tendency to serendipity inflects the quality of these encounters, by extending their range: if there are neither umbrellas nor sewing machines, there are eggslicers and bedpans, and their strangeness repunctuates the prose of rocks, trees, animals, and the human body, into a syntax that argues at once for the intolerably familiar and the gratifyingly alien.

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> Photography must always deal with things – it cannot record abstract ideas – but far from being restricted to copying nature ... the photographer has ample facilities for presenting his subject in any manner he chooses.... The photographer is restricted to representing objects of the real world, but in the manner of portraying those objects he has vast discretionary powers.

What is there, by now, to be said of that grand category, Space Itself, a careful invention that comes to us from two thousand years of occidental diligence in science and art, within whose awful dominion reasonable facsimiles of all things that are may be disposed and arrayed?

Stripped to its specifications, this Space may be described in the following ways: it is infinite, but it may be bounded; the position of any point within it may be perfectly described with reference to only three mutually perpendicular axes; it is structureless, perfectly uniform throughout its extent, and may be regularly subdivided; it is inert, colorless, odorless, tasteless; and it is absolutely empty. It was created for a single purpose; to recertify the existence of things released from, purified of, the contingencies of our other two splendid fictions, Causality and Time. When we bother to perceive it, we do so chiefly through only two senses: those of sight and hearing.

Finally, it may contain, enclose, define only one thing: Matter. Stripped to its specifications, matter has two qualities. First of all, you guessed it, it occupies space. Furthermore, it does something else: it has mass; but that is no concern of ours, any more than causality and time are concerns of Weston's. Things are that they are.

Matter is what we cannot avoid, because, out of sight and earshot, it is never out of mind, self-verifying to the deaf and blind; because, for us a thing is real or it is not, in measure as it is palpable. Whatever is 'out of touch' cannot ever be fully present to consciousness, because things must be verifiable by all our senses. Failing even a single sensory test, we are obliged to assume that we are in the presence of an illusion; or else that something has gone badly wrong, and we are 'seeing things,' or 'hearing things.' Thus the voiceless visual illusion, colorlessly volumetric, can never, for Weston, sufficiently testify to, perfectly enunciate, that irradiated vacuum within which alone things may be definitely measured off against Cartesian coordinates, and thereby proved to exist. It is as though the artist were obliged to discard his convictions about the prior existence of the things of the world, to rebuild them upon a rigorous philosophical foundation, before he may permit himself the luxury of assuming them as pretextual objects. Otherwise, there is always the danger that the illusion of volume may break down, defaulting to the material paper surface upon which the illusion transpires.

Hence, then, the overwhelming importance for Weston of the rendering of tactile surface detail. Not even the commonplace set of visual marks that we decode, by reflex, into tactile sensations ... accessories, so to speak, that are invisibly packed in the box with every new camera ... are enough to content Weston. He must have more than the smooth and rough, the wet and dry, hard and soft, the dense and the friable; he must contrive, if he can, to bring to his images the hot and the cold, the hirsute and the glabrous, the rigid and the limp, the unreceptive and the lubricious.

Then, in order to preserve the purity of Space against the premature conclusions of desire, to maintain some equipoise in this torrent of retinal concupiscence, Weston falls back upon ancient strategies: like sculpture, like painting, like drawing, the photographs decontextualize (metonyically truncating, but seldom amputating); they typify; they render anonymous, faceless.

Only the utmost conviction of the authenticity of the illusory context of a space guarantees the continuation of that space, sustains it, at once holds open its portals and maintains its elastic limits; so that it may be entered, may be possessed, without endangering the requirement that the one who enters, possesses, shall always be able to find his (yes, HIS) way out again.

Thus we discover, in these images, a certain cryptic symmetry among ends and means. If the pursuit of an illusion of space suggests a heightened rendering of the tactile, and its capture necessitates a pervasive, generalized eroticism, the artist finally has forced upon him a monumental paradox: driven to the utter mastery and possession of an abstraction as extreme as Space Itself, Weston is invincibly propelled toward the sexualization, the genitalization even, of everything in sight.

Finally we can begin to say what it is in Weston's photographs that at once attracts and repels us as our attention slowly oscillates, repeatedly penetrating the space of illusion, and withdrawing to the visibility of the projective surface. The photographs, as physical objects, are of a voluptuousness that rarely falls short of the exquisite. At the same time they are only scraps of paper, held in the hand: typical nameless merchandise of the industrial age. That is the distance the photographer sets between himself and us.

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> An intuitive knowledge of composition in terms of the capacities of his process enables the photographer to record his subject at the moment of deepest perception; to capture the fleeting instant when the light on a landscape, the form of a cloud, the gesture of a hand, or the expression of a face momentarily presents a profound revelation of life.

Somewhere in a book whose name I have forgotten, Alfred North Whitehead proposes to correct two items of vulgar terminology. What we call 'things,' he says, we should, in fact, refer to as Events.

A little more or less evanescent than ourselves, things are temporary, chance encounters and collocations between and among particles of matter or quanta of energy each of which, engaged in a journey though absolute space and relative time, has compiled a history that is not yet finished.

Contrariwise, what we call 'ideas' should, according to Whitehead, be renamed Eternal Objects, since their perpetuation, while owing something to such events in the universal history of matter as this present mind which thinks or deciphers, and this absent hand which writes, are, once formulated, independent of the local frailties of matter, standing at once within and without it. An Eternal Object, furthermore, is more than what is to be inferred from the static description of an Event; it is a behavior conducted by an Event, or, perhaps, it is an Event's notion of how to get other Events. I do not remember whether or not the recurrent patterns we call myths qualify as Eternal Objects, contingent as they are upon such momentary proclivities of matter as sexuality, curiosity, or irony. But what we call Language, understood as the maximal set of language-like codes that includes music, the natural languages, mathematics, kinesics, and pheromones, qualifies as a prime candidate for the status of Eternal Object.

Current neurophysiology and sociobiology regard the pheromone (a hormone-like medium that travels outside the body, and is decoded by the olfactory apparatus without being consciously perceived as an odor) as a protolinguistic sign operating in a single verbal mode: the jussive. Who receives the pheromonal message simply acts upon it, instantly, with the enthusiasm of a crocodile. Kinesic signals, purely neuromuscular in their expression and thus independent of glandular fallibility, represent, in this cartoon, a more intricate and parsimonious concatenation. Birds do it, laughing all the way. We might speculate, extrapolating from such principles, that the modes of the verb evolve in the order: jussive, imperative, optative, hortatory, conditional, subjunctive, declarative. The last named suspends, in a shared intellectual space between a message's sender and receiver, a representation of a mutually imagined object, unqualified with regard to what the sender expects the receiver to do about it.

Since every natural language known to us comprehends some equivalent of every one of these modes, but some cultures are without mathematics, or figuration, we may further speculate that a certain maturity of the declarative mode is prerequisite to language-like objects less ambiguous than natural language itself. Mathematicians, for instance, may be understood to assess the beauty and elegance of a proof according to whether or not it achieves full declarativeness, suspending itself within the space of the mind in a posture that requires of us nothing less than perfect recognition.

Like the pages of mathematical journals, Edward Weston's photographs present themselves to us bristling with indecipherable meanings, exhaling the certitude that somebody, somewhere, made this thing that is before us and understands it. To the uninitiate, the mathematician's whole page amounts to a single, indecipherable *numen;* to the initiate that opacity blossoms into discourse.

Weston's photographs entice us to discourse as well, promising, can we but learn to read their entrails, to deliver to us, in their own voices, those absolute names of things that are identical with things themselves. Once so seduced, we can never fully withdraw; but neither can we fully enter, because the space of the discourse is not our own. The mysteries are offered, but the rites of passage are withheld.

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> The appeal to our emotions manifest … is largely due to the quality of authenticity in the photograph. The spectator accepts its authority and, in viewing it, perforce believes he would have seen that scene or object exactly so if he had been there … it is this belief in the reality of the photograph that calls up a strong response in the spectator and enables him to participate directly in the artist's experience.

Whatever our apparent situation among the imaginary lines within their projective geometry, all of Weston's photographs present themselves to us at the same psychological distance, that is, in extreme closeup. Apostrophizing the significance of every last particle of matter, these images characteristically tell us more than we want to know; and yet, at the same time, they remain hopelessly distant, their glazed surfaces interposing, between spectator and spectacle, a barrier as impassable as language. As often as not, peering at or through or into these photographs, I have felt like a curmudgeon with my nose pressed to the window of a candy store whose goodies are offered at the single price of unconditional surrender. Take it or leave it. It remains to be seen, however, whether this violent polarization of distances inheres unconditionally in the materials and processes of photography as a universal constant, like the speed of light, or is to be understood as a benchmark and limit of Weston's art.

While they share with such other banalities of our culture as the printed page and the architectural facade a commonplace rectilinear planarity, painting, film and photography differ among themselves with regard to the distances that they invoke and enforce for both maker and spectator, and it might be worth our while to examine this family of distances from a strictly material point of view, as Weston would exhort us to do.

The most elementary of these distances is that remove, normally subject to severe anatomical limitations, between the painter and his canvas, which once tended to limit the absolute size of the painted surface to what could be seen whole, at arm's length, while standing foursquare in front of it. Thus we might imagine that the brief ascendancy of the roughly isotropic painting of mammoth dimensions proceeded from an impulse to exceed anatomical scale without making the painter walk too far or overstrain his imagination, and that such seeming tactics of physical distancing as Jackson Pollock's paint-slinging and Yves Kline's use of a flame thrower amounted to temporary strategies, transforming the vast surface of the work-plane into a miniature and extending across the interval of an enlarged studio the long arm of painting itself.

The spectator's distance from painting is of an elasticity normally limited only by the size of the architecture, except in such cases as James Rosenquist's *F-111*, whose panoramic format turns inside out the normal perceptual situation of monolithic sculpture, and offers the spectator the odd sensation of being scrutinized, from every side at once, by a reptilian gaze. Should we step within the confines of the velvet rope, the physical surface reassures us spectators that it is made up of nothing more alarming than kindly, benevolent Old Paint, which, as we already know, covers a multitude of sins.

The spectator's distance from film is more difficult to discern with clarity, because he stares at once at two surfaces: a physical one, which he had better not see, upon which is mapped, at high magnification, the virtual image of a barely intelligible little shred of picture-bearing stuff, the film frame ... and a temporal surface, which does not exist, but whose construction defines and circumscribes his work as spectator. A fundamental illusion of cinema is that the image itself, carrier of illusions, is 'there,' before us. It is not. Both physically and temporally, it is behind us. In film, the spectator's future is the artist's past. Within extremely wide limits, film images engage the spectator in a mutable dialogue on the nature and meaning of scale; but they are inherently sizeless. Thus the very notion of the spectator's distance from them must remain problematical.

Held in hand or hung on a wall, the photographic print is normally examined at a distance that is defined culturally rather than metrically. I refer to what is called 'reading distance.' A photograph takes up about as much *Lebensraum* as a quarto page; in particular, Weston's prints, and those of his epigoni, hang on for dear life to that great gift of Eastman Kodak, the industrial 8 x 10 format, as though it were their pants, or derived from the Golden Section, or Mosaically prescribed, like the chubby but sacred 1.33:1 aspect ratio of the cinema frame. Thus the photograph forever recollects, collides with, shares the space of another generalized and grossly meaningful mediator: the printed word. In fact, most of the photographic images we see are not photographs at all, but halftone reproductions accompanying text, indentured servants in the house of the word, usurping that white space of the page which Mallarmé was at such terrible pains to establish as an equivalent to the emptiness of blue air occasionally traversed by the projectiles of spoken utterance.

Now the printed page is not something that is to be examined every which way, but yields its meaning as we scan its serial collocation of signs in a carefully fixed order. In neither sense of the word is written language to be taken literally, for in pausing to examine typographic figures we lose the 'sense,' withdraw our culture, and become aware of seeing the page for what it really is: inherently meaningless marks inscribed upon a flat surface. These marks are, however, quite small and the reading of them requires of us a blindness, achieved through long training, to everything that lies outside the fovea of the eye. To read is to constrict physical vision to a microscopic point.

If we were to attempt to examine an image in this same way, we would find ourselves traversing that image, in darkness, with a flying spot of light, reading it out as it were a line at a time; it is interesting to note that the video image analyzes and resynthesizes its pretext in precisely this way, literally equating real spaces with the pages of a book. Clearly, though, looking at photographs in this way gets us nowhere fast. Photographs are small enough to be taken in whole, and yet large enough to afford the eye meandering and peripatetic opportunities which extend, like those offered by painting, over the entire area of the image.

Most of Weston's photographs, however, like most photographs that have ever been made, do not even try to account for the entirety of their rectangle. Typically they simply center a recognizable, bounded, and nameable icon within that rectangle and let the rest of it trail off into pictorial indeterminacy. It is as though the photographer were, and insisted that the spectator be as well, blind to everything outside the center of the eye ... as though the hypertrophied single sign had invaded the space of the text, like an isolated symbol ballooning to occupy a whole page. In the historically recent superimposition of the space of the photograph upon the space of the page, a polluted, hybrid space has arisen which offers, on the one hand, to return the printed book to the illegible magnificence of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and, on the other hand, reduces pictorial space to a membrane in whose neighborhood we are increasingly likely to find something neither more nor less complex than a written word or a letter of the alphabet.

(The Greco-Roman form of the capital letter 'A' recalls, in profile, the elevation of a pyramid, that is, the tomb of a Pharaoh, whose central chamber, when finally penetrated, is invariably found to be empty.)

In photography and film, the artist's physical distance from his work can never be satisfactorily quantified, because the actual surface upon which the work transpires cannot be located, or even identified, with certainty. Aside from the vague sense in which a film emulsion may be understood to be defaced, optically deformed, and even that by remote control, the still photographer's negative or the filmmaker's row of sequential images cannot properly be regarded as the 'actual' work; both are, rather, complex tools uniquely constructed for the job at hand, the negative amounting to something like a foundryman's mould, and the filmstrip, to an intricately specific notation to be performed automatically by a canonical machine. Neither negative nor filmstrip are normally seen by the spectator, who is unlikely, in most cases, to find them comprehensible, or their qualities crucially relevant to his experience of the work. What the spectator looks at, whether it be paper print or projection screen, is a standardized, nominally flat blankness, whose vicissitudes are immaterial to an understanding of the work, since they can never uniquely determine its appearance.

Weston, finding in the physical world no surface that he can point to with certainty as his workpiece, is at pains to construct one: a doubled imaginary plane, one face of which lies within the artist's consciousness and the other within the spectator's, upon his own side of which he projects, 'previsualizes,' a print that is to be finished in more ways than one. Weston's acute concern for the print, the grave libidinal importance he attaches to it, comes from this: it is no mere expendable sheet of paper which he marks, but an entity within the mind of another which he delineates and authorizes.

In so relocating the site of the photographer's work, Weston effects a divorce between photography and painting more consequential than the separation announced in his refusal to 'manipulate' the print. The painter's artifact is a unique material object which, once impaired in the slightest, is permanently destroyed, and lost forever to consciousness. The photographer's print, prodigy of craft though it may be, is a potentially indestructible *scenario* whose paramount quality is its legibility. Thus the photograph is made to resemble the word, whose perpetuation is guaranteed by the mind of a whole culture, safe from moth and rust; and the photographer's art becomes the exercise of a *logos,* bringing into the world, by *fiat,* things that never escape. Is this what Weston means when he uses the adjective 'eternal'?

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> Conception and execution so nearly coincide in this direct medium that an artist with great vision can produce a tremendous volume of work without sacrifice of quality.

A photographer as prolific as Weston enjoys a peculiar and appalling opportunity, that is, to reduplicate the world in a throng of likenesses and possess it entirely. It is true, of course, that one cannot photograph all cabbages, but one can photograph one and generate from the negative a potentially infinite supply of prints, happy in the certainty that one will never run out of cabbages. No levity, no mere question of connoisseurship, can be involved in the selection of the precise cabbage to be photographed. It must be undefiled, incorrupt; no verb may intrude to pollute, delete in the slightest from, the fulsome purity of the noun. Into the workshop of the photographer who would remanufacture the world, only one or the other of two verbs may come, and it is obliged to wipe its feet at the door: take or make. Take your choice.

The new universe, furthermore, must be, to put it mildly, more manageable than the old one. The noun must be modularized, made compact. By the operation of an algorithm that would seem to derive more from Lewis Carroll than from Procrustes, every noun must be shrunk or stretched to fit within the 8 x 10 rectangle. Were it a question of preserving the physical bodies of things, one might imagine them hollowed, bleached, pickled, and put up in endless rows of little glass jars, limp and folded like one of Salvador Dali's 'cuticles.' But the taking and storing of likenesses is ever so much more compact.

There is, in the spectacle of Weston's accumulation of some sixty thousand 8 x 10 negatives, something oddly funerary. It is as if one had entered the tomb of a Pharaoh. The regal corpse, immured in dignity and gilt, is surrounded on every side by icons of all that he will need to take with him into eternity: there must be food to eat, girls to fuck, friends to talk to, toys to play with; trivia and oddities to lend homely verisimilitude to that empty place; earth to walk upon and water to give the eye a place to rest; skies to put a lid on it all; other corpses to remind one that things have, indeed, changed; junk and garbage and rubbish to supply a sense of history; animals living and dead to admire, gawk at, or avoid; vistas to wander through when the spirit is weary.

Certain comical perils attend the assemblage of this riot of nouns. Failing the accomplishment of the sorcerer, one is in danger of being inundated like his apprentice. Is Weston, a typical modernist of the generation of the '80s, like T.S. Eliot, 'shoring fragments against his ruin'?

> [The discriminating photographer] can reveal the essence of what lies before his lens in a close-up with such clear insight that the beholder will find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object.

Ipse dixit!

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It is now more than thirty years since Weston made his last photograph, and twenty since he escaped permanently from the domain of

Time, joining the illustrious dead, and becoming an ancestor. But many of us cannot own him as an ancestor of ours. His splendors as a carnal parent are beyond contention; but as an intellectual parent, he amounted, finally, to one of those frowning, humorless fathers who teaches his progeny his trade and then prevents them from practicing it by blackballing them in the union. We are under no obligation to put up with this sort of thing.

But since some sort of choice must be made, I would state a personal perference for a chimera ... a hybrid of Venus Geneatrix, who broods over the mountains and the waters, indifferently donating pleasure and pain to everything that lives, and Tim Finnegan, who enjoyed everything, and most of all his own confusion, and ended with the good humor to preside happily over his own departure ... whose picture in the family album is no photograph at all, but an unfinished painting on glass, at once apparent within and transparent to this very space in which we live and work and must try to understand.

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> He especially liked to find the coded messages, the surfaces behind surfaces, the depths below depths, that gave ambiguous accounts of the nature of things. He loved the Atget photographs that looked into store windows in Paris and combined the world within with confusing reflections of the world without. It was the kind of conundrum he found irresistible.
>
> —Charis Wilson

> Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.
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> —Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

Possibly straining fairness, these notes tend to insist upon the typical photographs and manifestoes of Weston's maturity, largely disregarding the maverick work in which he transgresses against his own doctrine. This latter category, while it is not as copious as Weston says it is, does include a considerable part of his last work, which proposes to supersede everything that had gone before.

If it is so that the spectator or reader may understand more from a work than the artist understands, it is also true that he may understand other. For the consequences, in this writing, of exercising this last kind of understanding, I offer no apology.

Houston/San Juan/Buffalo, 1977-78

The quotations interspersed throughout are taken from an article, *Techniques of Photographic Art,* by "E. Wn.," written in 1941 and published in the *Encyclopœdia Britannica* of that vintage.

THE WITHERING AWAY OF THE STATE OF THE ART

A FEW YEARS AGO, Jonas Mekas closed a review of a show of videotapes with an aphorism to the effect that film is an art but video is a god. I coupled the remark, somehow, with another, of Ezra Pound's; that he understood religion to be "just one more unsuccessful attempt to popularize art." Recently, though, I have sensed a determination on the part of video artists to get down to the work of inventing their art, and corroborating their faith in good works.

A large part of that work of invention is, I take it, to understand what video is. It is a long standing habit of artists (in the life of the race it might be our most valuable habit) to postulate a present that is more privileged than the past. Video art, which is by now virtually alone in having no past that's shady enough to worry about, joins in that relentless search for self-definition which has brought film art to its present threshold of intensity and ambition ... and which, indeed, I understand to be the most notable trait of the whole text of modernism, throughout the arts, and in the sciences as well.

Moreover, it is doubly important that we try to say what video is at present, because we posit for it a privileged future. Since the birth of video art from the Jovian backside (I dare not say brow) of that Other Thing called television, I for one have felt, more and more, a pressing need for precise definition of what film art is, since I extend to film, as well, the hope of a privileged future.

But we know that what an art is, or what it is to be, is to be seen rather than said. I turn, then, to the mournful Aristotelian venture of trying to say, of film and video art, not what they are, but what they severally are not, and how and what they are like.

First of all, then, what delights and miseries do film and video share? Both the film frame and the complementary paired fields of video are, of course, metaphorical descendants of the Newtonian infinitesimal, so that both are doomed, as from a kind of Original Sin, to the irony of mapping relativistic perceptions upon an atavistic fiction of classical mechanics long since repudiated, along with the simian paradoxes of Zeno that prefigure the calculus, by the sciences. Still more comically, film and video share similarly athletic paleontologies: that of film yielding racehorses, and that of video, wrestlers. But within the compressed moment that constitutes their mutual Historical Period, we may say that film and video art have in common:

1. A need. It belongs to the artists who make the art, this need, and it is the raw need to make images, illusions apparently moving, within what both film and video understand to be a highly plastic temporality. Together they have virtually replaced painting as a technology of illusionism, throwing into high relief the painter's tactile needs to mark surfaces and make objects. (It cannot be entirely accidental that Amerian painters seized, for good and all, upon the material of their art at a moment that coincides precisely with the 'blossoming' of network television. Willem de Kooning's *Women* and the 'bad' telecast quality of the period intersect upon a single iconic terrain ... with the painter come to castigate the image, and purge it; and the anonymous video engineer, living, so to speak, in a different time, to indulge the wistful Occidental longing for a quick-and-easy universal surrogate for experience.)

2. A thermodynamic level. The procedures of most of the arts amount to heat engines; film and video first entrain energy higher up

in the entropic scale. Photons impress upon the random delirium of silver halide crystals in the film emulsion an illusion of order; electrons warp the ordered video raster, determinate as a crystal lattice, into an illusion of delirium.

3. An ecstatic and wearisome trouble. I refer to the synesthetic problem of the place and use of sound in the visual arts. We may take the course of grand opera as a summary of the catastrophes awaiting fools and angels alike in this esthetic quagmire. It is a commonplace that lip sync sound sank film art for decades. A few film artists, at least in their *doppelgänger* roles as theoreticians, penetrated some way into the nature of the problem, both before and after Al Jolson uttered those famous last words: "You ain't heard nothin' yet!" But I freely admit that film has not, on the whole, advanced very far in that montage for two senses that seems to imply a dialectical mutuality between the dual inhabitants of the human cranium ... granting, certainly, that we have abandoned the bourgeois assumption that purported surface verisimilitude is Art's Truest Note.

Ten years ago, filmmakers in New York used to say that you could tell a California film with your eyes shut, because there was invariably a sound track, and that sound track invariably consisted of *sitar* music. Times have changed, but the problem has not, and video artists seem still to be living in that moment. The unexamined assumption, that there must be sound, now yields, typically, the exotic whines and warbles of an audio synthesizer. Quite simply, most of the video sound I have heard bears, at best, a decorative or indexical relation to its coeval image, and at worst (and more often) obscures it.

At least one major filmmaker has, for twenty years, directed against the use of any sound a reasonable rhetoric that has increased in stridency as the muteness of his work has grown more eloquent; the same man (Stan Brakhage) has, of course, sinned often against his own doctrine, as we all must if we are to honor the good animal within us.

But again, and yet again, this chimaerical problem of sound rises up to strike us down in our tracks, film and video artists alike, and we cannot forever solve it by annihilating it. Sooner or later, we must embrace the monster, and dance with it.

4. Finally, film and video share, it now seems, an ambition. I have heard it stated in various idioms, with varying degrees of urgency. It first appears whole, to my knowledge, in a text of Eisenstein dating

to 1932, at a time when a similarly utopian project, involving the dissolution of the boundaries between subject and object, *Finnegans Wake*, was actually in progress. That ambition is nothing less than the mimesis, incarnation, bodying forth of the movement of consciousness itself.

Now that we have seen how film and video art are similar, how are they like things other than each other?

I think it is clear that the most obvious antecedents of cinematic enterprise, at least in its beginnings, are to be found in painting, an art which, justly losing faith in itself as a technology of illusion, had gradually relinquished its hold on a three-dimensional space that cinema seized once more, for itself, on its first try. The Lumière brothers' passenger train, sailing into the sensorium straight out of the vanishing point of perspective, punctures the frontal picture-plane against which painting had gradually flattened itself during nearly a century. Early accounts of the situation tell us that the image had power to move the audience ... clean out of the theater, and 'instruction' be damned. The video image assumes the frontality that painting has since had continual difficulty in maintaining.

On the other hand, it would seem that video, like music, is not only articulated and expended in time (as film is), but indeed that its whole substance may be referred to in terms of temporality, rhythm, frequency. The video raster itself would seem a kind of metric stencil, *ostinato*, heartbeat. As such, like music, it is susceptible of being quantified, and thus expressed completely in a linear notation. In fact, it is quite commonly so expressed. I do not refer to anything like a musical 'score,' of course. The notation of video is called tape, and it is perfectly adequate. The film strip of cinema is not a notation, but a physical object which we are encouraged to misinterpret under special circumstances. Video has, and needs, no such artifact.

Finally: how do film and video art differ, in fundamental ways that define the qualities of both?

We might examine first the frame, that is, the dimensionless boundary, that separates both sorts of image from the Everything Else in which that image is a hole.

The film frame is a rectangle, rather anonymous in its proportions, that has been fiddled with recently in the interest of publicizing, so far as I can see, nothing much more interesting than the notion of an unbroken and boundless horizon. The wide screen glorifies, it would seem, frontiers long gone: the landscapes of the

American corn-flats and the Soviet steppes; it is accommodating to the human body only when that body is lying in state. Eisenstein once proposed that the frame be condensed into a 'dynamic' square, which is as close to a circle as a rectangle can get, but his arguments failed to prosper.

In any event, cinema inherits its rectangle from Renaissance easel paintings, which tend to behave like the windows in post-and-lintel architecture ... provided, of course, that one experiences architectural space from the fixed vantage point of paraplegia.

The video frame is not a rectangle. It is a degenerate ameoboid shape passing for a rectangle to accomodate the cheap programming of late night movies. The first video image I ever saw, on a little cathode ray tube at the top of a four-foot mastaba, was circular. At least I think I believe that's what I remember I saw.

Things find their true shapes most readily as they look at themselves. Film, looking at itself, as the total machine that is cinema rephotographs and reprojects its own image, simply reiterates to unmodified infinity its radiant rectangle, asserting with perfect redundancy its edge, or perimeter, which has become, for us inhabitants of film culture, an icon of the boundary between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, what is present and possible to consciousness and what is absolutely elsewhere and ... unimaginable.

But let video contemplate itself, and it produces, under endless guises, not identical avatars of its two-dimensional 'container,' but rather exquisitely specific variations upon its own most typical content. I mean that in the mandala of feedback, graphically diagrammed illusion of alternating thrust and withdrawal, most often spiraling ambiguously like a Duchamp pun, video confirms, finally, a generic eroticism. That eroticism belongs to the photographic cinema as well, through the virtually tactile and kinesthetic illusion of surface and space afforded by an image whose structure seems as fine as that of 'nature'; video, encoding the universe on 525 lines precisely, like George Washington's face reduced to a dot-and-dash semaphore on the dollar bill, resorts to other tactics.

And as the feedback mandala confirms the covert circularity, the centripetal nature, of the video image, it offers also an obscure suggestion. If the spiral implies a copulative interaction between the image and the seeing mind, it also may become, when love is gone (through that systematic withdrawal of nourishment for the affections that is 'television,') a navel – the mortal scar of eroticism past – and thus an *omphalos*, a center, a sucking and spitting vortex into which the whole household is drawn, and within which it is consumed.

If I seem to be verging on superstition, please recall that the images we make are part of our minds; they are living organisms, that carry on our mental lives for us, darkly, whether we pay them any mind or not.

Nonetheless, if video and film ultimately unite in an erotic impulse, a thrust away from *thanatos* and toward life, they diverge in many particulars. For instance:

1. We filmmakers have heard that hysterical video artists say: "We will bury you." In one instance ... and it is a very important one ... I agree entirely. That instance is the mode we call animation. I have always felt animation, in its assertion of objecthood over illusion, to be an art separate from film, using the photographic cinema as a tool, as cinema uses the means of still photography (24 times every second) as a tool. Film and video typically extend their making processes within a temporality that bears some discoverable likeness to real time; and that simply is not true of the animated film. But I suspect (and perhaps hope) that video will soon afford, if it does not already, the means of fulfilling, in something like real time, every serious ambition animation retains. And that, of course, would mean a wonderful saving of time, out of the only life we may reasonably expect to enjoy.

2. For the working artist, film is object as well as illusion. The ribbon of acetate is material in a way that is particularly susceptible of manipulations akin to those of sculpture. It may be cut and welded, and painted upon, and subjected to every kind of addition and attrition that doesn't too seriously impair its mechanical qualities. Upon that single fact of film's materiality, an edifice has been erected, that of montage, from which all film art measures its esthetic distances.

In short, film builds upon the straight cut, and the direct collision of images, or 'shots,' extending a perceptual domain whose most noticeable trait we might call successiveness. (In this respect, film resembles history.) But video does not seem to take kindly to the cut. Rather, those inconclusions of video art during which I have come closest to moments of real discovery and *peripeteia*, seem oftenest to exhibit a tropism toward a kind (or many kinds) of metamorphic simultaneity. (In this respect, video resembles Ovidian myth.)

So that it strikes me that video art, which must find its own Muse or else struggle under the tyranny of film, as film did for so long under the tyrannies of drama and prose fiction, might best build its strategies of articulation upon an elasticized notion of what I might call – for serious lack of a better term – the dissolve.

Here the two arts of film and video separate most distinctly from one another. Film art, supremely at home in deep spaces both visual and aural, has need of intricate invention to depart from the 'frontal plane' of temporality – an aspect purporting to be neither imperfective nor perfective but Absolute. Conversely, video, immanently graphic, polemically antiillusionist, comes to spatio-temporal equilibrium through a dissolution, a fluidification, of all the segments of that temporal unity we call Eternity, into an uncooked version of Once Upon A Time.

Hence the mythification of the seven o'clock news, and the grand suggestion that the denizens of the talk shows are about to be transformed into persons; one feels, almost, Daphne's thighs encased in laurel bark. Hence also ... distantly ... television's deadly charm. Is it a cobra, or is it a mongoose?

3. Sigmund Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents,* suggests that civilization depends upon the delay of gratification. I might caricature this to mean that, by denying myself a hundred million lollipops, I'll end up with a steam yacht ... and go on to envision a perfect civilization entirely devoid of gratification. But every filmmaker must perforce believe in part of this cartoon, since filmmaking involves long delays, during which the work more than once disappears into the dark night of the mind and the laboratory. I remember, on the other hand, the first time I ever used video. I made a piece, a half-hour long, in one continuous take. Then I rewound the notation, and saw my work right away. That was three years ago, and to tell the truth some part of my puritanical filmmaker's nature remains appalled to this day. The gratification was so intense and immediate that I felt confused. I thought I might be turning into a barbarian ... or maybe even a musician.

4. The photographic cinema must be 'driven,' as synthesizer folk say, from the outside. But video can generate its own forms, internally, like DNA. It is the difference between lost-wax casting and making a baby. The most important consequence of this, is that

video (again, like music) is susceptible of two approaches; the deliberative, and the improvisational. Certain video artists have rationalized the synthesis of their images into closed fields of elements and operations, *raga* and *tala*. It is mildly paradoxical that this work, which seems to me, with respect to the density of its making activity, to correspond to the work of George Méliès in film, need produce no record whatsoever, may suffer itself to remain ephemeral ... while the Lumières of video, the improvisational purists of the Portapak, are bound absolutely to the making of tape notations. (I do not doubt that the exterior experience of work of either sort may be fully replete.)

5. There is something to be said about video color. One might speak of its disembodied character, its 'spirituality,' were one so inclined. That the spirituality in question is as vulgar as that of the painting from which (I conjecture) it took its bearings, is not surprising. The decade of the Sixties saw ... or rather, mostly did not see ... the early development of the video synthesizer contemporaneously with the hardening of a posture, within painting, that aspired to founding a chasm between color and substance. The photographic cinema, viewing its unstable dyestuffs as modulators of primal Light, mostly stayed at home, and tended to its temporal knitting, during a crucial period in chromatic thought.

For those who take note of such things, it will eventually become clear that video won out; were it not for the confusing matter of scale (video, after all, is 'furniture,' and has the protruding status of an object within living space; whereas public painting has gradually assimilated itself to the 'heroic' scale of public cinema) video images should rightly have replaced a good deal of painting.

6. If the motion we attribute to the film image is an illusion, nevertheless the serial still frames of cinema are discretely apprehensible entities that may be held in the hand and examined at leisure. When these frames are projected, they are uniformly interleaved with equal intervals of total darkness, which afford us intermittent moments to think about what we have just seen.

Conversely, the video field is continuous, incessantly growing and decaying before our eyes. Strictly speaking, there is no instant of time during which the video image may properly be said to 'exist.' Rather, a little like Bishop Berkeley's imaginary tree – falling forever in a real forest – each video frame represents a brief summation within the eye of the beholder.

7. Since the New Stone Age, all the arts have tended, through accident or design, toward a certain fixity in their object. If Romanticism deferred stabilizing the artifact, it nonetheless placed its trust, finally, in a specialized dream of *stasis:* the 'assembly line' of the Industrial Revolution was at first understood as responsive to copious imagination.

If the television assembly line has by now run riot (half a billion people can watch a wedding as consequential as mine or yours) it has also confuted itself in its own malleability.

We're all familiar with the parameters of expression: Hue, Saturation, Brightness, Contrast. For the adventurous, there remain the twin deities Vertical Hold and Horizontal Hold ... and, for those aspiring to the pinnacles, Fine Tuning. Imagine, if you will the delicious parallel in painting: a canvas of Kenneth Noland, say, sold with a roll of masking tape and cans of spray paint, just in case the perceiver should care to cool the painting off, or warm it up, or juice it up, or tone it down.

The point is obvious: Everyman has video to suit himself, even to turning it off or on, at minimal expense and effort. I am tempted to see, from one household to the next, an adequation of the broadcast image to the family's several notions of the universe. What a shame it is, we must often suppose, that other people persist in having their furniture so poorly adjusted.

Were we but intelligent enough, we might recognize here a window into the individual mind as unique and valuable as that afforded us by the 21-centimeter radio band into the universe outside our atmosphere.

I would like to close out these conjectures of mine, as suddenly as I can, by embroidering upon an anecdote. It is about an encounter between two fertile artists: Nam June Paik and Stan Brakhage. Both of them have served their visions so long that they have cast aside, in their thought, the withered rubbish (read 'hardware') that bears the bitterly ironic rubric: State of the Art. I can imagine Paik showing us video in a handful of dust, and Brakhage striking cinema from flint and steel. Well, anyhow, Paik was showing Brakhage his newest synthesizer, putting it through its paces. I can imagine Brakhage as he watched Paik elicit from the contraption, at the turn of a wrist, visions of his inner eye that he had labored for twenty years to put on film, feeling tempted by a new and luminous apple. "Now," said Brakhage to Paik, "can it make a tree?" I can imagine Paik's ready smile, that seems to come out of innocence, a little slyness, and the pleasure of feeling both ways at once. "Too young," Paik replied. "Still too young."

This text was written for, and delivered at, the conference "Open Circuits: The Future of Television" held January 23-25, 1974, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

A STIPULATION OF TERMS FROM MATERNAL HOPI

NEARLY A YEAR has elapsed since the discovery, at Oaxaca and Tehuantepec, of three caches of proto-American artifacts of a wholly unprevisioned nature; so that some sort of provisional report on them is long overdue. I must apologize at the outset for what must seem, to colleagues unacquainted with the unprecedented difficulties posed by the material, an excess of scholarly caution. In fact, I have proceeded with all possible haste in dealing with a body of data that has proved, to date, resistant to study by canonical methods.

I am bound to acknowledge that whatever little understanding I have achieved, has come largely through the perseverance and generosity of Dr. Raj Chatterjee, who heads the Project in Artificial Intelligence at Alleghany Universty; I owe him an insight that he first expressed with characteristic tersity: "We are obliged to assume that this stuff means *something!*"

My readers will recall that the archaeological finds in question were at once uncomplicated and singularly copious. All three sites included large silver mirrors, figured to remarkable flatness, and scores of transparent bottles, lenticular in shape and of varying curvature. But the bulk of the contents of those granite vaults (immediately dubbed 'archives' by the sensational press) consisted of some 75,000 identical copper solar emblems, in the form of reels, each of which was wound with about 300 meters of a transparent substance, uniformly 32 millimeters wide, that proved, upon microscopic examination, to be made of dried and flattened dog intestine.

These strips are divided along their entire length into square cellular modules each 32 millimeters high. Each such square bears a hand-painted pictogram or glyph. The colors black (lampblack in a vehicle derived from the leaves of *Aloe vera* and red (expressed from cochineal insects) predominate. There is seldom any obvious resemblance between consecutive pictograms. The draftsmanship is everywhere meticulous.

The dry climate has kept everything in a state of exquisite preservation; it is expected that lamination in polyester, nowadays a standard curatorial procedure, will offset a slight tendency to brittleness in the picture rolls. Oxygen dating places their fabrication during the 8th and 9th centuries of the present era, with a margin of error of only four per cent.

Complete cataloguing and analysis of this treasure will require many years; therefore, what follows is of necessity conjectural.

Of the culture of the artificers very little is apparent. They were men of the Cro-Magnon type of *Homo sapiens*, organized in a stable agrarian matriarchy, and calling themselves]N[. Their food consisted of cultivars of maize, and a variety of vegetables and fruits; dogs of medium size were bred as a source of edible protein and textile fiber, but were not used for work. The]N[worked stone and the native metals (copper, silver and gold), and were particularly adept in the technology of glass. A partly subterranean dome about ten meters in diameter, similar to the *hogan* of the Navajo, was the uniform shelter.

What took place within these domes distinguishes the civilization of the]N[from all other known societies. They seem to have spent most of their time and energy in making and using the pictogram rolls, which were *optically projected* upon the walls. Sunlight, led indoors by an intricate system of mirrors, served as the illuminant.

Images were brought to focus by lenses of water contained in glass bottles. At what rate the projected images succeeded one another is unknown.

What function this activity may have had is matter for speculation. The pictograms offer internal evidence that the projections served both educational and religious ends. Images of deities (if that is indeed what they are) occur with some frequency: they are depicted as human in scale, differing from the]N[themselves only in that their faces are without mouths, and their eyes, always open, are extremely large.

The pictograms clearly constitute a language. The semantic unit, however, is not the single glyph, but a cluster of two or more pictures which denotes the *limit* of a significance; where there are three or more, the images serve as points defining a 'curve' of meaning.

The connection between this visible language and speech is remote, and recalls the tenuous relationship between the ideograms of literary Chinese and their corresponding vernacular. Nevertheless, it has been my good fortune to decipher a few fragments, in privileged communication with a living female respondent in Hopi, and to establish clearly that the language of the ancient reels is ancestral to the secret languages, ritually forbidden to men and initiated male adolescents, that are to this very day spoken, *only by women among themselves*, throughout the remnant of the Mixto-Athapascan psycholinguistic community.

The parent tongue exhibits a number of unique traits. To begin with, it was a *speech-and-stance* language, with each component modifying the other. Since the picture rolls identify meaningful postures numbering in the thousands, it is doubtful that a one-to-one dictionary between English and]N[ ]T[can ever be constructed.

Secondly, the language was made up entirely of *verbs*, all other 'parts of speech' deriving from verbal states. A 'noun' is seen merely as an instantaneous cross-section through an action or process.

The inflexional structure of the language was vast, exceeding in size that of Sanskrit by at least an order of magnitude, to which was added an array of proclitic and enclitic particles, of uncertain usage, seemingly derived by onomatopoeia from the sounds of the breath, as inspired and expired during different sorts of effort.

The verb stem consisted of one or more invariable consonants, or clusters of consonants. The grammar varied, according to intricate rules of euphony as well as meaning, the vowels and diphthongs in the initial, medial and final positions that I have indicated with square brackets in the glossary that follows.

I append the few terms that I have thus far managed to decode. The reader is warned that multiple ambiguities of the sort found under]K[ ]SK[,]V[ ]TR[,]Y[ ]X[,]N[ ]T[, and]L[ ]L[ ]X[are the rule. Apparent exceptions are simply illustrative of defects in my own comprehension.

1. [ ] = The radiance.
2.]D[ ]Y[= Containers to be opened in total darkness.
3.]PS[ ]L[= A drug used by women to dilate the iris of the eye.
4.]H[ ]H[ ]L[= Epithet of the star]S[ ]S[ ]N[*, used while succulents are in bloom.
5.]PT[ ]Y[= Last light seen by one dying in the fifth duodecad of life.
6.]XN[= Heliotrope.
7.]TL[ ]D[= Rotating phosphenes of 6 or 8 arms.
8.]BN[ ]T[= Shadow cast by light of lesser density upon light of greater.
9.]V[ ]TR[= The pineal body; time.
10.]XR[= The sensation of sadness at having slept through a shower of meteors.
11.]MR[ ][= The luster of resin from the shrub]R[ ]R[, which fascinates male babies.
12.]NX[ ]KT[= The light that congeals about vaguely imagined objects.
13.]DR[ ]KL[= Phosphorescence of one's father, exposed after death.
14.]SM[ ]N[= Fireworks in celebration of a firstborn daughter.
15.]GN[ ]T[ ]N[= Translucence of human flesh.
16.]TM[ ]X[ ]T[= Delight at sensing that one is about to awaken.
17.]TS[ ]H[= Shadow cast by the comet]XT[upon the surface of the sun.
18.]R[ ]D[= An afterimage.**
19.]D[ ]DR[= A white supernova reported by alien travellers.
20.]K[ ]SK[= A cloud; *mons Veneris*.
21.][ ]Z[ ]S[= Ceremonial lenses, made of ice brought down from the high mountains.
22.]KD[ ]X[= Winter moonlight, refracted by a glass vessel filled with the beverage]NK[ ]T[.

23.]P[ ]M[ ]R[= Changes in daylight initiated by the arrival of a beloved person unrelated to one.
24.]G[ ]S[= Gridded lightning seen by those born blind.
25.]W[ ]N[ ]T[= An otherwise unexplained fire in a dwelling inhabited only by women.
26.]G[ ]GN[= The sensation of desiring to see the color one's own urine.
27.]M[ ]K[= Snowblindness.
28.]H[ ]R[= Unexpected delight at seeing something formerly displeasing.
29.]H[ ]ST[= The arc of a rainbow defective in a single hue.
30.]L[ ]L[ ]X[= The fovea of the retina; amnesia.
31.][ ]R[= The sensation of satisfaction at having outstared a baby.
32.]ST[= Improvised couplets honoring St Elmo's Fire.
33.]V[ ]D[= The sensation of indifference to transparency.
34.]Z[ ]TS[= Either of the colors brought to mind by the fragrance of plucked]TR[ferns.
35.]X[ ]H[= Royal expedition in search of a display of Aurora Borealis.
36.]T[ ]K[ ]N[= Changes in daylight that frighten dogs.
37.]Y[ ]X[= The optic chiasmus (*Colloq.*); abysmal; testicles.
38.]N[ ][ ]T[= The twenty-four heartbeats before the first heartbeat of sunrise.
39.]F[ ]X[= A memory of the color violet, reported by those blinded in early infancy.
40.]T[ ]Y[ ]Y[= The sensation of being scrutinized by a reptile.
41.]B[ ]NM[= Mute.***
42.]N[ ]T[ ]N[= The sound of air in a cave; a reverie lasting less than a lunar month; long dark hair.
43.]S[ ]TY[= The light that moves against the wind.
44.]B[ ][= Changes in one's shadow, after one's lover has departed in anger.
45.]N[ ]GR[= The fish *Anableps,* that sees in two worlds.
46.]RZ[ ]R[= The sensation of longing for an eclipse of the Moon.
47.]H[ ]F[= The fungus *Stropharia cubensis.*
48.]S[ ]LR[= Familiar objects within the aqueous humor.
49.]W[ ]X[ ][= A copper mirror that reflects only one's own face.

50.]MN[ ]X[= Temporary visions consequent upon trephining.
51.]G[ ]KR[= Cataract.
52.]RN[ ]W[= Hypnagogues incorporating unfamiliar birds.
53.]M[ ]D[= A dream of seeing through one eye only.

This text is for Stan and Jane Brakhage.

Eaton, New York 1973/1975

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* Probably Fomalhaut *(alpha Piscis Australis.)*
** Also used as a classifier of seeds.
*** Standing epithet of ancestral deities.

DIGRESSIONS ON THE PHOTOGRAPHIC AGONY

"This is the end of art. I am glad I have had my day."

—J.M.W. Turner, 1839/40

I BEGIN WITH a fantastic case: the recent discovery of an imaginary relic.

A tanker returning to Arabia, running blind in a fog at night, collides with an uncharted object. The morning light reveals, instead of the expected crag, an enormous sphere floating in the sea, covered in barnacles and corrosion: it is nearly 1000 feet in diameter. Investigators at the scene determine that the thing is metallic and hollow, a colossal bubble, within which the most sensitive devices fail to detect any activity whatsoever.

A tabloid columnist hints that the menace to navigation may be a product of intelligence. His speculation prospers, and the sphere is towed ponderously up the Thames to the Isle of Dogs, to be beached where, more than a century before, I.K. Brunel built and launched the *Great Eastern*. In a fury of sandblasters and jackhammers, workmen swarm over the riveted hulk. The first square yard scraped clean reveals, in indubitable relief, the single word: ATLANTIS. Screaming headlines proclaim the Lost Continent found.

A small contingent of heavily armed Commandos escorting three specialists—a mountaineer, a photographer, and a psychiatrist—descends through a manhole found at the zenith of the sphere. Hours later, the whole party emerges unharmed. Dazed, grimy, their faces frozen in the hornswoggled look of men lost in a perfect ecstasy of boredom, they explain that they have found ... nothing. Or, rather, *less* than nothing: they have found only *photographs*.

Of a hundred decks within the structure, the bottom dozen or so are awash in bilge; the remainder are piled high with photographs of every sort and condition. Some are immaculately preserved, others eroded and dog-eared and faded nearly past recognition. They are boxed, or tipped into albums, or rolled into cylinders that crack at a touch, or strewn in loose stacks on shelves or underfoot. Some few bear signatures, or captions, or dates. Most are on paper, but a few images adhere to metal, or glass; very occasionally, a picture adorns an otherwise undistinguished mug or platter. Interspersed throughout the mass are verbal oddments: manuscript pages, pamphlets, articles torn bodily from magazines, a few books. And that's all. The most pitiless search turns up nothing of value.

Once the find is established as utterly worthless, there remains the problem of disposal. Respectable institutions flatly refuse to have anything to do with the dusty mess; finally, a few indigent archives of technological incunabula are persuaded to trundle away a portion of the stuff. The rest is given out to the middle class, as a sort of perverse ballast for their attics, or else it just disappears.

Time intercedes with its familiar mercies. A generation passes. And then an obscure doctoral candidate stumbles upon an hypothesis that electrifies the scholarly world. Kneeling in the gloom of a subcellar in Rochester, New York, leafing through a crate of Atlantis' leavings, the young man glimpses a pattern of coherence in its contents, and leaps to an insight that startles him half out of his wits.

Reasoning from an imperfect analogy with the mysterious culture of porpoises and whales, who abandoned the encumbrance of physical objects when they returned to the sea, and embraced instead a bodiless oral tradition of music, literature, and argumentation, our scholar postulates an Atlantic civilization that expended its entire energy in the making of photographs. During its palmiest days, the whole citizenry united in the execution of a great project, much as the medieval towns had built their cathedrals, or the men of Tsin their Great Wall. But the Supreme Artifact of Atlantis was vaster than either ... and incomparably more sophisticated.

Briefly described, it consisted in nothing less than the synthesis, through photographic representation, of an entire imaginary civilization, together with its every inhabitant, edifice, custom, utensil, animal. Great cities were built, in full scale and complete to the minutest detail, by generations of craftsmen who dedicated their skills to the perfection of verisimilitude: these cities existed only to be photographed. But the ambitions of Atlantis went far beyond this concern for *mise en scène*. Patient research establishes a deliberate four-fold complication in the plan.

In the first place, the imaginary culture is depicted as passing through time ... the total apparent span amounting to about eighty years. This necessitated endless further effort: walls had to be gradually dirtied and effaced; buildings demolished or burned, repaired, rebuilt. Illusory machines were gradually refined. Celebrities were made to age. A sprinkling of wars, natural disasters, and social upheavals were staged with the utmost care.

Secondly – and this was a masterstroke – the people of the fictitious culture itself were represented as the makers of the Artifact. It is remarkable that, in the whole work, no faintest trace of Atlantis proper is visible anywhere, nor has any Atlantic technician left a shred of evidence from which his own existence might be inferred. It is the creatures of illusion who are avid photographers.

An unexpected corollary provides that these illusions have, on the whole, no uniform concern for their photographs. Some few are treasured in museums, their delicacy guarded in unseen vaults; far more are treated as expendable, and survive according to chance, there being no apparent qualitative difference between what is saved and what is discarded.

And finally, as a crowning touch, the Atlantic masters fabricated a critical tradition to accompany the images: a puzzling collection of writings that is gathered into the so-called Atlantic Codex. It is precisely the opposite of its subject: the photographs are everywhere copious, exact, assured; the Codex is unrelievedly sparse, vague, and defensive.

Following immediately upon the revelation in the Rochester basement, scholars undertake an Inventory (of uncertain completeness), which is succeeded by a somewhat shaky *Grundriss*. Monographs, synopses, and *Festschrifte* proliferate; at this writing, in fact, they still continue to multiply.

Every researcher finds himself first hypnotized and then exasperated by the Artifact's most striking quality: through some freak of clairvoyance, the illusion that emerges from the endless photographs bears an uncanny resemblance to our own 19th century, or, more precisely, the years 1835 to 1917. By further miraculous coincidence, the Codex is written largely in what appears to be semiliterate dialects of English and French – although the text often lapses into nonsense.

What is the meaning of the Artifact? And why did the people of Atlantis go to such lengths in making it? Hope seems to be waning that the riddle will be solved. The answer rests, finally, upon the decipherment of two words, both hopelessly ambiguous, that appear on nearly every page of the Codex. Barring the chance discovery of a Rosetta Stone, we may never understand them, since they defy contextual analysis.

The first of these is "science." And the second is "art."

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Whoever once notices early photography, soon finds it bulking large as a continent ... what in *this* world that continent recalls is hard to say. Viewed as a body of innocent document, only our reflex acquiescence to the plausibility of the photographic image contradicts what that same image so poignantly enforces: a sense of times and places altogether lost, and thus irretrievably alien: an Atlantis. Analytic criticism finds it an Antarctica: clearly marked boundaries mostly filled with the white that cartographers use to designate unexplored wilderness. Excavating for the remains of the responsible parties – the photographers themselves – yields us a gallery of hybrid monsters long extinct: half astronomer, half painter, half mathematician, half showman, and so on ... a kind of esthetic Gondwanaland.

It is a continent bounded in time. Landfall occurs in August of 1835, at Lacock Abbey, Chippenham, where William Henry Fox Talbot made the first paper negative; the farther coast is reached in June, 1907, aboard the liner *Kaiser Wilhelm II,* where Alfred Stieglitz made *The Steerage* ... through shoals and reefs extended through the days of "291" and on into the first World War.

Whatever sort of place early photography is, there have been repeated attempts to map it. Two such attempts are the occasion of this text. Both partake a little of the quaintness of old maps of America, which are as likely to show local fauna or minerals as they are major landmarks.

The first was called *Masterpiece*, and is subtitled "Treasures from the Collection of The Royal Photographic Society." (This map shows us where the gold is.) The second was called '*From Today Painting Is Dead*,' subtitled "The Beginnings of Photography." (This map shows us where the animals are, along with a great deal else.) Both exhibitions appeared under the auspices of The Arts Council of Great Britain. Both proceed from very different assumptions, and it is these assumptions that I shall have to examine at some length.

Masterpiece alloted its small space with scrupulous fairness. Six or seven prints apiece represented 13 photographers. Since they are masters (Q.E.D.), it matters what their names are. They are, in order of their dates of birth: David Octavius Hill, 1802-70 (with Robert Adamson, 1820-48); Oscar Gustav Rejlander, 1813-75; Julia Margaret Cameron, 1813-79; Roger Fenton, 1819-69; Henry Peach Robinson, 1830-1901; Frederick Henry Evans, 1852-1943; Peter Henry Emerson, 1856-1936; Frank Meadows Sutcliffe, 1859-1940; Alfred Stieglitz, 1864-1946; Richard Polak, 1870-1957; Clarence White, 1871-1925; Edward Steichen, 1879-1973; Alvin Langdon Coburn, 1882-1966. (The history of photography is compressed: I am obliged to notice that fully half these names belong to men still alive during my own lifetime.)

The list reads like a roll of honor, openly courting the customary blasts and blesses of the reviewer. One is ritually grateful for Rejlander's *The Two Ways of Life;* one questions, ritually, the inclusion of Evans, whose *oeuvre* is small and specialized (cathedrals, plus Aubrey Beardsley) in a notably copious and variegated company; one ritually grits one's teeth at the ritual inclusion of Steichen, whose work certainly has been blessed sufficiently, by this time. One is ritually astonished at Polak's Old Dutch interiors, made in 1913-17 (presumably in obeisance to Burlington House) in the very teeth of Vorticism, not to mention the Armory show and God knows what else. But one is *not* invited to question the assumption implicit in the title of the show.

If the roster of contributors is unimpeachable, it nevertheless strongly suggests a *Little Golden Book of Photography*. We have all seen the same thing done to painting: the sort of kid stuff that begins with Raphael (adroitly side-stepping Giotto), gum shoes its way through Leonardo AND Bosch AND Velasquez AND Gainsborough, omits Turner, coyly assents to Gauguin, captures Juan Gris *en passant,* and ends with a haughty nod at Klee. Our objections to such crude anthologies are twofold: they avoid 'difficult' artists, certainly; and, disingenuously, they avoid 'difficult' works by their chosen exemplars. Pedagogy alone protects such non-choices, with arguments as unanswerable as Jehovah's.

And pedagogy is the tacit pretext for *Masterpiece*. The show was designed to tour England (where photography is a national pastime second only to gardening); in other words, it was packaged for the provinces ... ever so neatly packaged, in modular panels, behind wavy plexiglas that drowned the images in ambient reflections. When I saw it (at Portsmouth) the provinces seemed to be receiving the package with customary thanks: five days after the scheduled opening, the panels were still propped at random around the walls.

I had been lured to England by a catalogue which implied (without ever promising it) great amplitude; the disappointing impression was instead one of paucity – and moreover, of downright preciousness, as of ambrosia being dispensed a drop at a time. In the midst of gratitude for much of what *was* shown, was a titillating sense of seeing 'samples,' rather than fully representative segments from 13 bodies of work. In a word, photography, which has been the unacknowledged staple protein of Western visual sensibility for more than a century, was finally being served up in the eggshell teacups of Art. The very title, *Masterpiece,* had been lifted bodily from the assumptions surrounding painting.

Now I do not deny the existence of masterpieces, so long as that word is understood to connote seminal force rather than mere luster. But the term brings to mind an image of discrete monuments, arrayed with perpetual care in the cemetery of Culture, evaluated by a boom-or-bust criticism that would prefer every candidate to be named Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mt Rushmore. What engrosses us more readily, I believe, is the patterned perceptual energy displayed in the work of a lifetime; for a photographer that work nearly always amounts to many hundreds of images, and may run much higher (Edward Weston left 60,000 negatives). Comparatively slow and expensive procedures like painting *fragment* sensibility into the massive precipitates called masterpieces. Cheapness, and rapidity of execution, are fundamental conditions of photography; they facilitate *continuous* entrainment of sensibility; so that it is probably more precise to say that in photography there are Masters, who are likely at any instant to make an image that will teach, or move, or delight us.

But behind this flooding of the photographic continent to produce from its peaks an archipelago of masterpieces, there lies more than mere esthetic confusion, or a good-natured attempt to put photographs over as High Art by pretending that they're paintings. An official of the Royal Photographic Society contributed a catalogue preface in which she pointed out (in the midst of a mouth-watering enumeration of the Society's holdings) that *rare, old* photographs (*aliter,* "masterpieces") are now worth MONEY. In fact, the sum of sixty-eight thousand quid was mentioned, and deprecated as "too low a figure." The vexing old question of archival permanence was deftly tied to money (right where it belongs). It was intimated that, before the collection may be made available to scholars, the Society must get more money. Such indeed, folks, are the facts of life. I question whether the front pages of an exhibition catalogue are the most appropriate place to have one's nose rubbed in them. The space might better have been given over to an introductory essay by Aaron Scharf, who wrote the very serviceable notes.

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Far from the opalescent hush of *Masterpiece,* another sort of show entirely, *'From Today Painting Is Dead,'* closed at the Victoria and Albert Museum a few days before I arrived in London; I was privileged to see the photographs (but none of the apparatus that made up a substantial part of the more than 900 items exhibited) after they had been taken down for return to scores of public and private lenders in England and France. I must stress the word, *privileged,* for I don't expect ever to see most of them again. It is unfortunate that some museum – *any* museum, no matter of what kind – did not bring this exhibition to the United States, since we haven't the resources, on this side of the Atlantic, to put together anything even remotely like it. All that is left is a catalogue that should become a model of its kind.

'From Today Painting Is Dead' troubles itself not at all about the dignity of art (though its contributors do, often enough), but assumes instead that photography is a *technology,* designed for making whatever image the user pleases, without excessive fuss: the motive is presumed to differ from one photographer to the next.

The show details, at lucid length, the invention of the magical contraption of optics and chemistry, and then sails cheerfully into the ebullient free-for-all that photography has been since its first moments. And yet every image seems directly linked to every other, like a neuron in the racial memory that is the chief social function of photography.

The most astounding things, it seems, have been photographed: the great and famous, of course, by others who somehow became great and famous in the act of photographing them. But here too are anonymous images of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers; and archaeological excavations undertaken by Isaac Newton; and men on the barricades in the rue de Flandre, during the Paris Commune; and tiny I.K. Brunel in top hat, standing beside the surrealistically enormous anchor-chains of the *Great Eastern;* and ... the list *is* endless.

Literally everything has been photographed ... that is, *since* 1835. In case this observation seems drearily obvious, I would point out simply that we *know* (whether we want to or not) what Ulysses Grant looked like, and the Crystal Palace; the same thing cannot be said, with any conviction, for Aristotle, or the Alexandrian library. In the course of a few generations, the past has taken on much of the substantiality of the present, most of which we only experience indirectly – that is, through photographs – anyway.

The instantaneous mnemonic process works with perfect precision, no matter *who* presses the button. In every early discussion of photography as an art, it is that single fact that seems to cause the most trouble.

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Points define a periphery. Three points define a triangle; but it is well to remember that the same three points may also determine a unique circle. A collection of points, if sufficiently large, delimits the boundary of a continent – provided only that we know where each point stands in relation to every other one. Call each point a work of art: the task of criticism may be understood as the location of points in relation to others. Normally, that task is facilitated by the emergence of axes that gradually crystallize from a saturated solution in which the ingredients are expectedly tedescan – inventory, *Grundriss*, synopsis, monograph, *Festschrift* – and the solvent, long contemplation.

> There is no substitute for critical tradition: a continuum of understanding, early commenced. Rémy de Gourmont surmised that the *Iliad* discovered today in the ruins of Herculaneum "would produce only some archaeological sensations" ... illustrative of some vanished civilization. Precisely because William Blake's contemporaries did not know what to make of him, we do not know either, though critic after critic appeases our sense of obligation to his genius by reinventing him.... In the 1920's, on the other hand, *something* was immediately made of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, and our comfort with both works after 50 years, including our ease at allowing for their age, seems derivable from the fact that they have never been ignored.[1]

Thus the critic Hugh Kenner, on a problem in contemporary literature. He might as well be writing about photography during the embryonic period under discussion; only the least shift in conjectural emphasis is required. For a kind of mute *Iliad* has been dug up, from the ruins of one and another collection, and fairly vibrates with the urge to produce more than 'archeological sensations.' And neither *Masterpiece* nor '*From Today Painting Is Dead*' make of the photographs anything more than their contemporaries did: on the one hand, photography is uncomfortably treated as an Art (that is, a branch of painting, seen strictly as an image-making craft); on the other, it is viewed as a Science (or technology – the two were scarcely dissociated during the extended *annus mirabilis* that begat photography), a way to ordered knowledge.

And around the 1920s, *something* was immediately made of work by the generation of Strand and Weston. In fact, they were themselves finally able to make something coherent of it, to found a 'continuum of understanding.' The question of whether photography was a Science had evaporated by then, since photographic technology had already assimilated the hard sciences: astronomer, radiologist, high-energy physicist, physical chemist, molecular biologist were (and remain, in the operational sense) photographers; handfuls of hybrid technologies had sprung up as well. But the hoary question remained to bedevil the men of '291': is photography an art?

Polemically, they annihilated it. Paul Strand exhorted young photographers to "forget about art" (recommending "honesty" as a more useful *mantram*); Weston flatly refused to be called an artist in print. The posture solidified, and it is characteristic of most photographers today that they couldn't care less.

But the question dogged the photographer's every step for six or seven decades, splintering into a one-sided catechism: is photography an art? if the answer is "yes," what sort of art is it? is it like painting? how is it unlike painting? if the answer is "no," then what *is* it anyway? and so on, *ad nauseam*. An agonized confusion came of the effort to cover every imaginable bet; the effort to resolve that confusion has engendered transvaluations that have yet to run their full course in the visual arts (although, admittedly, still photography itself has not occupied the main arena for a long time).

For the photographer willing to adopt a fixed perceptual distance from his pretext (to become a 'stylist') Art offered a workable recourse and rationale: and the century gestated a phalanx of memorable stylists. Of these, Julia Margaret Cameron can serve as the perfect type; sitters recall in their diaries Procrustean ordeals in the back garden of an obsessive, dumpy woman exhaling hypo. The results were images of oneiric force: but one cannot help asking whether the eyes of Herschel, Tennyson, and Darwin could all have been haunted in precisely the same way.

But for more restless spirits, the pattern became intricate to the point of disjunction or of self-interference. The portraitist Nadar began as a newspaper caricaturist: his portraits hint, rather than betray, such beginnings; and then he ascended in a hot-air balloon and became the first aerial photographer of Paris. And *then* he made a blandly ironic self-portrait, posed in a balloon's basket, inside his studio, against a painted backdrop derived from one of his own aerial photographs.

Roger Fenton's reputation is based upon his photographs of the Crimean War: a subset within his body of work that is strictly comparable to that of the corporate fiction we call "Mathew Brady." In Fenton's time the painterly categories were fairly rigid. Ontologically handcuffed as he was to the prior existence of a 'subject,' he should have waited for the next war. But no; a catalogue note tells us: "... [his] activities extended to ... a striking set of informal photographs of the Royal family, with landscape and architectural views, still lifes, city and river views and exotic 'orientalist' costume pieces."

In 1857, O.G. Rejlander composed (the verb is deliberate) *The*

Two Ways of Life, a monumentally campy and insipid moral tableau, 'inspired' by a currently influential treatise on painting. Amid murmurs of indecency, the work was certified as Art when Prince Albert bought a print. What is remarkable about it is that it was synthesized from more than thirty separate negatives; a dimensionless stasis fabricated from an armload of negatives shot during long months. The same invention generated a series of 'composite photographs' that prefigure images that we associate, eidetically, with the '20s and '30s of this century. In 1860, Rejlander publicly repudiated art, but continued his experiments on the sly. What did he do for a living all this time? Seemingly at the other end of the spectrum, he made candid, pathetic views of street life. His photographs of children interested Charles Darwin, who used them in preference to drawings to illustrate (with the required accuracy) his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872).

At 30 years of age, Peter Henry Emerson abandoned a medical career for photography. Three years later, in 1889, he published *Naturalistic Photography*, a defense of photography as an art, basing his arguments firmly (and rather grotesquely) upon Helmholtz's *Physiological Optics*, a book that also interested painters of Emerson's generation, just as Goethe's treatise on optics had polarized Turner's thought nearly a century earlier. The book aroused controversy, in the midst of which, only one year later (following upon an interview with 'a famous painter') he published *The Death of Naturalistic Photography*, and proceeded to buy up and destroy copies of the earlier work, denouncing photography as an art. In 1899, Emerson published an 'expurgated and expanded' third edition of *Naturalistic Photography*. And during the whole time, his style suffered little change beyond a gradual refinement.

Clearly, we are in the presence of minds experiencing a serious confusion. The speed and ease and economy of their process traps that confusion, as if in amber ... without explicating it.

Consider the preposterous case of a contemporary painter who invents, within a period of five years, the mature styles of, say Willem de Kooning, Frank Stella, and James Rosenquist ... and then denounces painting. We should be obliged to consider such a person a little crazy, or else a naive opportunist; alternately, we might think of him as a critic.

But the latter evaluation would necessarily rest upon our reflex tendency to examine axioms, rather than corollaries, to seek the energy of thought among the deliberately held assumptions of a work ... seen *alongside* that work's denumerable traits, in a kind of stereoscopy.

And the 19th century was not noticeably given to examining its assumptions. In most disciplines, the more pressing game of consolidating holdings was afoot. They scarcely seemed to imagine that there *is* such a thing as an assumption: Locke and Newton had bequeathed them Laws, instead. Hence our perpetual temptation to suspect that they couldn't think their way out of a paper bag.

And because they couldn't, it quite often happens that we can't either.

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'From Today Painting Is Dead,' we are told, in a moment of bravado dating to the early 1840s. The remark (It is apocryphal. Of course.) is attributed to one Paul Delaroche, himself a reformed painter, who ran a prosperous school and studio in Paris.

Behind the assertion lies an explicit assumption about painting that painters themselves had already begun to question: that the inescapable condition of painting was representation, spatial and tactile illusion – 'imitation,' in the narrowest possible sense. And the invention of photography made it forcibly obvious that representation was a task to which painting had never been very well suited. For those with a *need to make images*, painting had simply sufficed, as a 'technology' ... there being none other available.

William Henry Fox Talbot, who invented the negative-positive process that has become synonymous with photography, is the first person in whom we find, fully dissociated from the painter's legendary object-making and surface-marking needs, *the need to make images*. Talbot was an amateur scientist. His first published paper was called *On the properties of a certain curve derived from the equilateral hyperbola:* a curve is the *image* of an equation. He writes of tracing images on the *camera obscura:*

> This led me to reflect on the inimitable beauty of nature's painting which the glass lens of the Camera throws upon the paper in its focus ... creatures of a moment, and destined as rapidly to fade away ... how charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably, and remain fixed upon the paper![2]

Nature itself is seen as a succession of fugitive *images* ('paintings!'); Talbot explicitly withdraws the artist's hand from the making process (though it is hidden there anyway, since opticians *assume* Renaissance perspective when they grind their lenses). The images are to fix themselves, durably outside time. The notion of the apparently self-generated work, sufficient in its own immanence and only nominally connected to an invisible or anonymous maker, has haunted art ever since.

But along with the obvious representational assumptions about painting, early photographers unconsciously adopted others less obvious, and it is here that they confounded themselves.

Painting 'assumes' architecture: walls, floors, ceilings. The illusionist painting itself may be seen as a window or doorway. And painting in the Occident, like architecture, is 'built' from the ground up and a brick or gesture at a time. Indeed the metaphor of 'building,' of composition, has underpinned our choice of what is *respectable* in art for a long time. But of course there have always been works of art that are simply 'made,' emerging from nowhere in particular, through the mediumship of the artist, like Pallas from the brow of Zeus, in seeming defiance of ordinary gestation.

'Built' art and 'made' art have never inhabited watertight compartments; rather, each has glanced wistfully over its shoulder at the advantages of the other … has, on occasion, worn the mask of the other. But those who build have tended to scorn those who make, for the air of naked *utterance* in which the made work so often wraps itself. Gertrude Stein, the most obvious aspect of whose work is its appearance of having been built up from small pieces, quotes herself scolding a protegé: "Hemingway, remarks are not literature."

Early photographers accepted the axiom that True Art must be *built*, and mimed it faithfully. But their image-making process, instantaneous and indivisible, did not lend itself to analysis into successive painterly gestures, so photographers adopted a different strategy: they made 'arrangements,' substituting persons and things for the painter's brushstrokes and washes. And the results were, as often as not, ludicrous. An hilarious case in point is the oldest surviving specimen of photographic pornography, a 'mythological subject' dating from 1842. At his obscenity trial, the photographer proposed to justify the picture as art by pointing out the careful inclusion of Doric columns and a potted palm.

By the mid-1850s, Rejlander and H.P. Robinson had made this process of construction, from literal image-pieces seamlessly joined, absolutely synonymous with photographic Art: for they had not merely pressed the button ... demonstrably, they had performed skilled labor, had Done Something. Where most photographs seemed to exist by suspicionable fiat, they had manufactured an Object. And object-making is a second assumption, brought over from painting, that has confounded photography.

Paintings are traditionally built by a process we might call *dubitative* – in other words, the painter fiddles around with the picture till it looks right. At its least coherent, the painting process recalls Anton Webern's description of modulation in tonal music: "I go out into the hall to hammer in a nail. On my way there I decide that I'd rather go out. I act on impulse, get into a tram, come to a railroad station, go on travelling, and finally end up – in America! That's modulation!"[3] Such objects respond well to a critical approach that derives from Cartesian doubt: criticism has typically made discoveries about painting, representational or otherwise, by pretending that it does not know what it is looking at.

But photographs do not respond at all gratefully to this sort of examination: their illusions are too carnally potent to remain submerged for long in matter. Considered as objects, photographic images are quite unprepossessing – flat, anonymous sheets of paper, sensually unrewarding aside from their modulation of light – and often completely insubstantial: the projected photograph (which subsumes the whole of the cinema) simply has no physical existence at all.

Nor does the survival of the photographic work of art seem to depend very firmly upon its casual materiality: photographs withstand the grossest attrition, remaining plausible illusions so long as the least shred of an image lasts. (*The Last Supper*, or the papyrus fragments of Sappho, are objects of veneration from which we *infer* works of art; but they ceased to be a painting and some poems a long time ago.) Attempts on the part of photographers themselves to treat the image as an object have ultimately degenerated into an insistent shibboleth called "printed quality," the sole pursuit of which virtually assures slow death in that same Sahara where every art ends up that identifies itself with its own mechanics. The photographic process is *normative*. Perfect adequacy is always good enough.

I seem to be saying of photographers that they toil not, and neither do they spin. But in fact the photographer does make something; and what that is, is easy enough to say, if I may be permitted a homely simile. A butcher, using only a knife, reduces a raw carcass to edible meat. He does not *make* the meat, of course, because that was always in the carcass; he makes 'cuts' (dimensionless entities) that section flesh and separate it from bone.

The photographic act is a complex 'cut' in space and time, dimensionless, in itself, as the intersections and figures in Euclid's *Elements* … and, in the mind, precisely as real.

Certain photographs, through the justice of their cutting, even seem to share a privileged identity with their subjects. Every visitor to Mount Rushmore, the Grand Canyon, the Pyramids, the Parthenon, hastens to bring home precisely the image he has already seen, hundreds of times – in photographs; he thereby makes his own clichés that were at one time vistas newly decreed, imaginary lines laid out in projective space by the first photographers who saw them, acts of making more durable than stone, and nearer to geomancy than bricklaying.

Through such acts, endlessly renewed, we have learned to recognize all the appearances of the world; through such acts, from its very beginnings, photography reasserts art's most ancient and permanent function: the didactic.

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1. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era,* 1972.
2. W. H. Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, 1844.
3. Anton Webern, *The Path to the New Music*. The remark is from the lecture dated February 4, 1933.

A LECTURE

PLEASE turn out the lights.

As long as we're going to talk about films, we might as well do it in the dark.

We have all been here before. By the time we are eighteen years old, say the statisticians, we have been here five hundred times.

No, not in this very room, but in this generic darkness, the only place left in our culture intended entirely for concentrated exercise of one, or at most two, of our senses.

We are, shall we say, comfortably seated. We may remove our shoes, if that will help us to remove our bodies. Failing that, the management permits us small oral distractions. The oral distractions concession is in the lobby.

So we are suspended in a null space, bringing with us a certain habit of the affections. We have come to do work that we enjoy. We have come to watch *this*.

The projector is turned on.

So and so many watts of energy, spread over a few square yards of featureless white screen in the shape of a carefully standardized rectangle, three units high by four units wide.

The performance is flawless. The performer is a precision machine. It sits behind us, out of sight usually. Its range of action may be limited, but within that range it is, like an animal, infallible.

It reads, so to speak, from a score that is both the notation and the substance of the piece.

It can and does repeat the performance, endlessly, with utter exactitude.

Our rectangle of white light is eternal. Only *we* come and go; we say: This is where I came in. The rectangle was here before we came, and it will be here after we have gone.

So it seems that a film is, first, a confined space, at which you and I, we, a great many people, are staring.

It is only a rectangle of white light. But it is all films. We can never see *more* within our rectangle, only *less.*

A red filter is placed before the lens at the word 'red.'

If we were seeing a film that is *red,* if it were only a film of the color red, would we not be seeing more?

No.

A red film would *subtract* green and blue from the white light of our rectangle.

So if we do not like this particular film, we should not say: There is not enough here, I want to see more. We should say: There is too much here, I want to see less.

The red filter is withdrawn.

Our white rectangle is not 'nothing at all.' In fact it is, in the end, all we have. That is one of the limits of the art of film.

So if we want to see what we call *more,* which is actually *less,* we must devise ways of subtracting, of removing, one thing and another, more or less, from our white rectangle.

The rectangle is generated by our performer, the projector, so whatever we devise must fit into it.

Then the art of making films consists in devising things to put into our projector.

The simplest thing to devise, though perhaps not the easiest, is nothing at all, which fits conveniently into the machine.

Such is the film we are now watching. It was devised several years ago by the Japanese composer Takehisa Kosugi.

Such films offer certain economic advantages to the film-maker.

But aside from that, we must agree that this one is, from an aesthetic point of view, incomparably superior to a large proportion of all films that have ever been made.

But we have decided that we want to see *less* than this.

Very well.

A hand blocks all light from the screen.

We can hold a hand before the lens. This warms the hand while we deliberate on *how much less* we want to see.

Not so much less, we decide, that we are deprived of our rectangle, a shape as familiar and nourishing to us as that of a spoon.

The hand is withdrawn.

Let us say that we desire to *modulate* the general information with which the projector bombards our screen. Perhaps this will do.

A pipe cleaner is inserted into the projector's gate.

That's better.

It may not absorb our whole attention for long, but we still have our rectangle, and we can always leave where we came in.

The pipe cleaner is withdrawn.

Already we have devised four things to put into our projector.

We have made four films.

It seems that a film is anything that may be put into a projector, that will modulate the emerging beam of light.

For the sake of variety in our modulations, for the sake of more precise control of what and how much we remove from our rectangle, however, we most often use a specially devised material called: *film.*

Film is a narrow transparent ribbon of any length you please, uniformly perforated with small holes along its edges so that it may be transported handily by sprocket wheels. At one time, it was sensitive to light.

Now, preserving a faithful record of where that light was, and was not, it modulates our light beam, subtracts from it, makes a vacancy, that looks to us like, say, Lana Turner.

Furthermore, that vacancy is doing something: it seems to be moving.

But if we take our ribbon of film in hand and examine it, we find that it consists of a long row of small pictures which do not move at all.

We are told that the explanation is simple: *All* explanations are.

The projector accelerates the small still pictures into movement. The single pictures, or frames, are invisible to our failing sense of sight, and nothing that happens on any *one* of them will strike our eye.

And this is true, so long as all the frames are essentially similar. But if we punch a hole in only one frame of our film, we will surely see it.

And if we put together many dissimilar frames, we will just as surely see all of them separately. Or at least we can *learn* to see them.

We *learned* long ago to see our rectangle, to hold all of it in focus simultaneously. If films consist of consecutive frames, we can learn to see *them* also.

Sight itself is learned. A newborn baby not only sees poorly – it sees upside down.

At any rate, in some of our frames we found, as we thought, Lana Turner. Of course she was but a fleeting shadow – but we had hold of something. She was what the film was *about.*

Perhaps we can agree that the film was about *her* because she appeared oftener than anything else.

Certainly a film must be about whatever appears most often in it.

Now, suppose Lana Turner is not always on the screen.

Suppose further that we take an instrument and scratch the ribbon of film along its whole length.

Then the scratch is more often visible than Miss Turner, and the film is about the scratch.

Now suppose that we project all films. What are they about, in their great numbers?

At one time and another, we shall have seen, as we think, very many things.

But only one thing has *always* been in the projector.

Film.

That is what we have seen.

Then that is what all films are about.

If we find that hard to accept, we should recall what we once believed about mathematics.

We believed it was about the number of apples or peaches owned by George and Harry.

But having accepted that much, we find it easier to understand what a film-maker does.

He makes films.

Now, we remember that a film is a ribbon of physical material, wound up in a roll: a row of small unmoving pictures.

He makes the ribbon by joining large or small bits of film together.

It may seem like pitiless and dull work to us, but he enjoys it, this splicing of small bits of anonymous stuff.

But where is the romance of movie-making? the exotic locations? the stars?

The film artist is an absolute imperialist over his ribbon of pictures. But films are made out of footage, not out of the world at large.

Again: Film, we say, is supposed to be a powerful means of communication. We use it to influence the minds and hearts of men.

But the artist in film simply goes on building his ribbon of pictures, which is at least something he understands a little about.

The pioneer brain surgeon, Harvey Cushing, asked his apprentices: Why had they taken up medicine?

To help the sick.

But don't you enjoy cutting flesh and bone? he asked them. I can't teach men who don't enjoy their work.

But if films are made of footage, we must use the camera. What about the romance of the camera?

And the film artist replies: A camera is a machine for making footage. It provides me with a third eye, an acutely penetrating extension of my vision.

But it is also operated with my hands, with my body, and keeps them busy, so that I amputate one faculty in heightening another.

Anyway, I needn't really make my own footage. One of the chief virtues in so doing is that it keeps me out of my own films.

We wonder whether that interferes with his search for self expression.

If we dared ask, he would probably reply that self expression interests him very little.

He is more interested in recovering the fundamental conditions and limits of his art.

After all, he would say, self expression was only a separable issue for a very brief time in history, in the arts or anywhere else. And that time is about over.

Now, finally, we must recognize that the man who wrote the text we are hearing read, has more than a passing acquaintance and sympathy with the film-maker we have been questioning.

For the sake of precision and repeatability, he has substituted a tape recorder for his personal presence – a mechanical performer as infallible as the projector behind us.

And to exemplify his conviction that nothing in art is as expendable as the artist himself, he has arranged to have his text recorded by a different film-maker, whose voice we are hearing now.

Since the speaker is also a film-maker, he is fully equipped to talk about the only activity the writer is willing to discuss at present.

There is still time for us to watch our rectangle awhile.

Perhaps its sheer presence has as much to tell us as any particular thing we might find inside it.

We can invent ways of our own to change it.

But this is where we came in.

Please turn on the lights.

New York City, 1968